

Eco-feminist Perspective in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*

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Abstract: Barbara Kingslover utilizes her writing as a platform to bring attention to the social justice, environment and the interconnection between women and their communities. Her works mainly focus on the issues such as environmental crises, parental relationships, and the struggle for self-identity. The present study aims to analyze Barbara Kingslover *The Bean Trees* as an Eco-feminism novel. It is a speculative work, which examines the issues of Eco-feminism. This work mainly focuses on the common connections between women and nature especially the Mother-earth concept is supported to argue the habitual insight of preserving and protecting nature as well as respecting women should be practiced in our contemporary society.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, environment crisis, interconnection, self-identity, preserving.

The Bean Trees, published in 1988 is an Eco-feminist perspective-based novel, which brings out a close-knit between women and the environment. Kingslover has used the symbolic connection that exists between women and the environment. Many of the themes in these works include refugees, illegal immigration, single mother, poverty, and Native American rights. In these works, there exists a symbolic relationship between the women characters during adverse circumstances and these are echoed by nature and symbols. Kingslover as a biologist and her strong love for nature are prominent throughout the novel. The characters of Kingslover find peace when they were in the natural environments and they love to live around the landscapes of the natural world. Kingslover's protagonist Taylor who lives in Arizona learns to engage herself in the natural world. In Taylor's original Kentucky home, the polar opposite of the natural world. She is charmed by the plain beauty of these new landscapes.

An Eco-feminist perspective insists that pregnancy, giving birth, raising children, and doing household work are the long-time social roles of women which closely relates them to nature. Vandana Shiva the author of the book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival* "describes Eco-feminism by saying that it is the childbirth and industrialization of plant reproduction" (32). The natural imagery in Barbara Kingslover's *The Bean Trees* compares women's destiny with nature and gives oppression to women and nature.

"We crossed to Arizona state line at sunup. The clouds were pink and fat and hilarious-looking, like the hippo ballerinas in a Disney movie. The road took us through a place called Texas Canyon that looked nothing like Texas, heaven is praised for that, but looked like nothing else I had ever seen either. It was a kind of forest, except that in place of trees there were all these puffy-looking rocks shaped like roundish animals and roundish people". (36)

The symbols such as animals, planting trees, birds, pigs, horses, and the beautiful landscape which clearly show the connection between woman and nature. The novel also deals with the suffering of women and the threat of nature. These are the incidents echoed with nature imagery and symbol. *The Bean Trees* conveys the story of a young woman named Taylor Greer, who leaves her small hometown in Kentucky in search of a more fulfilling life. Taylor became a guardian of an abused child whom she names Turtle, while driving west across the United States,

"The Indian child was a girl. A girl, poor thing. That fact had already burdened her short life with a kind of misery I could not imagine. I thought I know about every ugly thing that one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl." (31)

Turtle, who has been scrutinized as a two years old female child, was harmed just because the baby was a girl. The two years old girl child is crushed as birds crushed under the wheels on the roads just because they are not being bothered. The violence against women in the world is rape, which is forced upon a small child just because she was a female. The word nature is often described in feminine and sexual terms such as nature are raped, mustered, conquered, controlled, and minded. The domination over the girl children in the world is explained in *The Bean Trees* and the girl child who has been seduced stands as the representation of the whole of the female community. She is named a turtle because of her grabbling ability as a mud turtle. Kingsolver is an ecologist and a strong believer in nature because of that it influences her to use such biological symbols. “As I planted the beans, Turtle followed me down the row digging each one up after I planted it and putting it back in the jar. Good girl, I said. I could see a whole new era arriving in Turtle’s and my life” (44).

The Eco-feminist perspective in Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees* can be seen clearly and the characters of women of the modern age in America are very strong and independent in nature. The power and dedication to their non-traditional family are maximum to their existence within the intern of society. Kingsolver is able to bring out the significance of community in the life of each individual, by creating such a community for her women characters. She effectively includes the harmony of individuality with the longing desire to live in a community, and the interaction and conflict between humans and the nature in which they live. Kingsolver describes the life of Taylor’s mother after being abandoned by her husband. Taylor’s mother used to work as a housekeeper to support her daughter and herself. Taylor’s mother is abandoned by her father when he knew that she is pregnant. Her mother doesn’t mind that her foster left, in fact, she often tells Taylor, “Trading Foster for (you) was the best deal this side of the Jackson Purchase” (45).

After that Taylor is exposed to some horrible things that fathers can do to their children, at that time she feels very lucky to grow up without a father. After her husband’s abandonment, Taylor’s mother’s attitude is strange towards men and her obligations to Taylor. Through these incidents, we can observe a clear feministic view in her novels.

Kingsolver gives another view of feminism in her novel *The Bean Trees*. She portrays the trip of Lou Ann’s visit to her doctor to show the sexual harassment of women in a male-dominated society. When Lou Ann was at the doctor’s clinic, the nurse gives her a booklet about some exercises that she has to do. The picture of a woman holding a baby has seen on the cover page of the booklet Lou Ann says that such a picture in the booklet can be put together by men who don’t like the looks of pregnant women, none of the many pamphlets she received from her doctor’s office have pictures of pregnant women Lou Ann says that while riding the bus, men don’t look at her directly and they, in general, leave her alone. Driving a bus full of people without facing sexual harassment is a quite pleasant one. Before her pregnancy, she couldn’t ride the bus without being touched and criticized by men.

Kingsolver talks about natural historical and biological events to create images and symbols. The hardened artery in the human body is compared by her to the railroad system in Tucson. She described the environment when it is affected by unnatural factors and the human being have been affected by such pollution. The industry and the wrong uses of the resources which affect nature and destroy the landscapes are also described here. The domination of males on both women and nature is interlinked by Kingsolver. She tries to convey her message that woman tries to keep the environment as clean as possible and decrease the possibilities of the destruction of the landscapes. “In the old days, I suppose it would have been bringing the city a fresh load of life like a blood vessel carrying platelets to circulate through the lungs.” Nowadays, If you could even call the railroad an artery of Tucson, you would have to say it was a hardened one” (57).

She brings another picture of the destruction of nature. A vivid picture of the beautiful jungle is shown in the work and the jungle is turned black. She also illustrates how women care for nature.

“Mattie’s purple bean vines hung from the fence like long strips of beef jerky dying in the sun. it broke my heart to

see that colorful jungle turned to black slime, especially on this of all days when people everywhere were sending each other flowers, but it didn't faze Mattie". (55)

Kingsolver portrays the eco-feministic perspectives in which women are close to nature which is the concept of Mother-Earth. Taylor's connection with nature is obvious, she used to plant seeds that we know from these, "We are planting a garden just like Old MacDonald in your book, here's squash seeds, here are pepper seeds and here are eggplants" (68), from this we can understand the deep connection of nature with women and native people. Susan Griffin an Eco-feminist writer in her work *Women and Nature: the roaring inside* explicates how women are mentally associated with nature more than man. The connection between women and nature is often explained by the images of nature, birds, pigs, turtles, and horses.

"Women speak with nature. That She hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. But for him, this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world and that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature." (72)

An Eco-feminist perspective declares that all forms of suppression are attached and that structure of suppression must be addressed in their totality. Suppression of the natural world and of women by patriarchal power structures must be examined together or neither can be confronted fully. This socially constructed Suppression formed out of the power dynamics of patriarchal systems. Ruether, *New Women New Earth*, she states that,

"Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demand of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society." (76)

In chapter twelve of her novel, Kingsolver states the beauty of the natural landscapes. Mattie takes her friends to the desert and makes them see the first rain. Kingsolver's consciousness of the environment is shown by the description of the natural beauty of the landscapes. The figure of speech is illustrated by her to show a clear description of the land. The beauty of nature is described by her by use of mountains, cities, and the palm of the human hand. The phrase "resting in its cradle of mountains" (60). The valley is like a baby and the phrases "city like a palm" and "lifelines and heart lines" suggests the adult. The life lived from birth to death is personified by land. Taylor falls in love with the Arizona land and sky, and her appreciation for nature in all its forms, with all its surprises, mirrors the values the novel espouses.

"The whole Tucson Valley lay in front of us, resting in its cradle of mountains. The sloped desert plain that lay between us and the city was like a palm stretched out for a fortune teller to read, with its mounds and hillocks, its lifelines and heart lines of dry stream beds." (65)

In Kingsolver's novel *The bean trees*, her writing style and techniques are represented through the main female character Taylor. The novel revolves around oppression, racialism, and classism. The women characters in the novel have experienced great hardships and misery in the process of searching for identity and struggling for freedom and equality. A clever young girl named Taylor moves away from her small-town community Pittman, Kentucky to Tucson, Arizona. The beauty of nature is described frequently in the novel. The death of the hog is another death that has happened because of nature, so nature is also described as the destroyer. When Lou Ann says, "Lou Ann looked abnormally flattened against the back of the sofa. I thought of her father, who she'd told me was killed when his tractor overturned" (80).

Kingsolver's natural history is obvious at the end of the novel. The Rhizobia, microscopic bugs that live on the roots of wisteria vines is a historical incident read by Taylor. Rhizobia makes a necessary part of wisteria vines: They produce fertilizer out of nitrogen gas. At this time, Taylor creates a symbolic link between the

interdependence of the Rhizobia and the wisteria plants and the wisteria represents Taylor's positive relationships with the many people she's met. Without the link of friends and family, she would not be a mature woman.

"But this is the most interesting part, wisteria vines, like other legumes, often thrive in poor soil, the book said. Their secret is something called rhizobia. These are microscopic bugs that live underground in little knots on the roots. They stuck nitrogen gas right out of the soil and turn it into fertilizer for the plant." (99)

Karren J Warren in her work, *A Western Perspective on what it is and why it matters?* States, "the theory of relating symbolic connections are brought out distinctly between women and nature in the novels of Barbara Kingsolver. Eco-feminist literature asserts that the notion of power must be restructured. Collaborative relationships should be nurtured instead of power dynamics" (88). In the story through the protagonist, the author believes about modern-day human beings and the way they affect nature and also the ways in which humans can help to restore the earth to its natural beauty. The author has always been promoting that humans become responsible promoters of both the good and the bad in nature. In chapter thirteen of her novel the birds were killed on the roads of Tucson, here the birds represent the liberty of nature but this liberty is endangered by the limitations of modern life in cities like Tucson. Birds are beings killed on roads and trapped in houses where they never belong. In the story, Taylor feels bad when a blackbird was killed on the side of the road and also tries to release a trapped song sparrow from her kitchen.

"Outside of town we passed a run-over blackbird in the road,
flattened on the center line. As the cars and trucks rolled by, the
gusts of wind caused one stiff wing to flap up and down in a pitiful little
flagging-down gesture. My instinct was to step on the brakes, but of course,
there was no earthly reason to stop for a dead bird." (110)

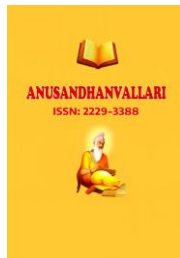
Cultural Eco-feminism describes women in various terms close to nature and animals like rose trees and birds. From this, it is clear that women are considered soft and oppressed by masculinity. Turtle resembled a cat in the novel *The Bean Trees*,

"Cynthia had these tawny gold eyes like some members of the cat family, as certain fair-haired people do. The doll was a hand-me-down from Mattie's. It came with a pair of red-checked pajamas, complete with regular-sized shirt buttons, which someone had apparently sewn by hand. Turtle adored the doll and had named it, with no help from anyone, Shirley Poppy." (160)

Kingsolver suggests a solution for this suppression of the feature of the world. Her suggestion was that women and nature must be dealt with carefully and male dominance must have retreated against women and nature. Barbara Kingsolver focuses on the natural connections of suffering between nature and the female, dominated by the patriarchal society, as an effective Eco-feminist writer, giving a solution for the benefit of the future world to join hand against the exploitation of nature as well women.

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