

Exploring Ecofeminism: A Deep Dive into Sentimentality in Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*

¹Dr. S. Shibu , ²Dr. Aashi Baynes Cynth R.B

Assistant Professor of English, St. Jude's College, Thoothoor, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University Tirunelveli -627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

Assistant Professor, Vidyavardhini's College of Engineering & Technology, Affiliated to University of Mumbai, K.T. Marg, Vasai – West, Maharashtra, 401202, India.

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Abstract

Ecofeminism explores the connection between women and nature in culture, religion and literature. Ecofeminists addresses the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women. The men are the curators of culture and women are the curators of nature. The men dominate the women and the humans dominate the nature. Ecofeminism emphasizes that both women and nature must be respected. The world in which human beings live is not only made with the language and social elements but also with the kingdom of nature. Human beings are completely depended on the natural resources for their livelihood. Human life is heavily affected by the nature and its environment when the problem of availability of fresh water has become acute. The problem of eliminating industrial waste has become a chronic problem for the survival of human civilization. Barbara Kingsolver, the prominent writer of American literature has a close affinity with human and non-human nature. Being a regional writer of the new west America and the representative of ecofeminist fiction, Kingsolver specifically states that the attachments of land along with human mind are crucial vectors in the resolution of the environmental conflicts. The present paper aims at analyzing how the land suffers because of its inability to contribute to the basic needs for the survival of human beings. Kingsolver affirms the view that if the mentality of human beings considerably changes then their attitude towards nature, will be a boon for their life and that is thoroughly ensured.

Keywords: Curators, Eliminating, Survival, Affinity, Ecofeminist.

Ecofeminism concerns the connection between women and nature, in culture, religion and literature. Established by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, Ecofeminism uses the basic feminist tenets of equality between genders, a revaluing of non-patriarchal or nonlinear structures, and a view of the world that respects organic processes, holistic connections, and the merits of intuition and collaboration. To these notions, ecofeminism adds both a commitment to the environment and an awareness of the associations made between women and nature. In particular, this philosophy emphasizes the ways both nature and women are treated by patriarchal (or male-centered) society. In this respect, ecofeminists believe in the sacredness and interconnectedness of all forms of life. They dislike patriarchal attitudes because they believe that it leads to the exploitation of the earth's resources without concern for long-term consequences. Many ecofeminists have noted the link between the way societies treat animals and the natural environment.

The present paper spotlights Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, a passionate and complex novel published in 1999 which focuses on love, forgiveness and one woman's struggle to find her place in the world. Kingsolver, one of the acknowledged eco-writers in American literary milieu and the acclaimed author of *Flight Behavior*, *The Lacuna*, *The Bean Trees*, and other modern classics, poignantly reveals the environmental issues and deals with them with a notion of justice. By connecting ecology to biology and agriculture, Barbara emphasizes that *Animal Dreams* is not only a political but also a scientific and an economical concern.

Ecofeministic themes are clearly presented through the novel *Animal Dreams* by the women of Grace (Codi's hometown), not the men, who organize to save the town from industrial pollution. This novel describes the lives of the Native Americans and their philosophy of living a life that harms the environment as little as possible. This

way of living comes into conflict with the way the other Americans chose to live and it affects their resources present around them.

The heart of the story lies in the fact that Kingsolver had dedicated the novel *Animal Dreams* to Benjamin "Ben" Linder, a twenty-seven-year-old hydroelectric engineer and humanitarian from Portland, Oregon, working in Nicaragua. For four years after his graduation, he supported the Sandinista revolution and was building a dam in contested territory for the National Institute of Energy at the time of his death from the combined assault of hand grenades and shotgun and machine gun fire. The Contra guerrillas ambushed and slew him, along with six other workers, in San José de Bocay on April 28, 1983, at the project site of El Cua. Barbara honoured Ben because of his dedication to volunteerism. Blending flashbacks, dreams and Native American legends, *Animal Dreams* is a suspenseful love story and a moving exploration of life's largest commitments.

Animal Dreams is narrated by two different narrative voices: the first person narration by Cosima "Codi" Noline and the third person narration by her father Dr. Homer. Codi, the protagonist, is a young woman who is unsure of her life, and as the novel unfolds, she becomes aware of her life and the political and environmental issues. On the other hand, Dr. Homer is a country physician who suffers from Alzheimer's disease and always attempts to be objective and to maintain himself at a distance. Codi and her sister, Halimeda "Hallie", didn't have a close relationship with Dr. Homer, "which is to say that mail was okay and short, badly connected phone calls were best" (12). Hallie is a textual character who is only present through Homer's and Codi's memories and also through her letters. She moves to Nicaragua, where she is kidnapped by Nicaragua rebels, the Contras, who shoot her in the head and leave her body by the road side. Therefore, Nicaragua serves as a global backdrop in *Animal Dreams*.

Several plot lines have been interwoven in the novel: Codi's involvement in Grace, Homer's struggle with Alzheimer's, Hallie's work in Nicaragua as an agronomist and the environmental crisis that works as a connection for the plot lines. The novel is set in the rural town known as Grace in Arizona. The people living in Grace depend on land for their livelihood. The rural and agricultural settings bring nature and ecology to the forefront. Economically, Grace is built and survives by means of its orchards and the railroad, which provides employment for the town's men. Culturally, it is a mixture of Anglo and Mexican American, with Native Americans. The Baptist Grocery in Grace's small commercial district is an indication of former Anglo influence, but the predominant flavor of Grace to which Codi returns is Hispanic. Spanish is still spoken a lot, most of the citizens have Hispanic names, Mexican folk and religious customs such as the Day of the Dead are celebrated, and the close family structures are matriarchal rather than patriarchal.

Like Grace, the Santa Rosalia Pueblo, where Loyd takes Codi at Christmas, is notable for its natural beauty and also for its antiquity as well as the sense of the sacred it transmits. Codi describes Spider Rock, a sandstone spire that rises more than 700 feet from the floor of the canyon, as "The canyon walls rose straight up on either side of us, ranging from sunset orange to the deep rust, mottled with purple. The sandstone had been carved by ice ages and polished by desert eons of sandpaper winds. The place did not so much inspire religion as it seemed to be religion itself" (210). As they travel in the canyon, Codi observes that ancient pictures have been carved in the rock, of antelopes, snakes and ducks as well as some human figures. This human adornment of nature is in marked contrast to the human intervention that has altered the landscape of Grace, producing ugly, polluting mines.

For ecocritics, the nature really exists. The novel then talks of the protagonist, Codi, who leaves Tucson and returns to her small rural hometown, Grace, after fourteen years to take care of her ailing father and to teach high school biology. Stepping down from the bus, Codi admires the beauty of Grace in her first sight and explains it: "The view from here was orchards: pecan, plum, apple. The highway ran along the river, dividing the orchards like a long, crooked part in a leafy scalp. The trees filled the whole valley floor to the sides of the canyon. Confetti-colored houses perched on the slopes at its edges, with their backs to the canyon wall" (9). Living in Grace is like living in heaven. But on the other side, Codi sees the old Black Mountain copper mine: "the smelter's one brick smokestack pointed obscenely at heaven" (9). It shows the picture of eroding Grace:

Grace is made of things that erode too slowly to be noticed: red granite canyon walls, orchards of sturdy old fruit trees past their prime and a shamelessly unpolluted sky. The houses were built in no big hurry back when labor was taken for granted, and now, they were in no big hurry to decay. Arthritic mesquite trees grew out of impossible crevices in the cliffs, looking as if they could adapt to life on Mars if need be. (8)

Codi and Hallie had more affection towards nature, compared to what they had towards humans around them. It

was in their tender age when they, putting their lives on the line, saved coyotes from drowning in the flood. Hallie feels strongly about righting the wrongs of the world and boldly goes off to Nicaragua to put her ideals into practice. She never has a crisis of confidence on herself or on the value of what she is doing. More importantly, she has no difficulty in identifying with something larger than herself.

Generally, women also do much of the subsistence labor that protects and renews local environment. However, Hallie vehemently denies that she is doing anything as grandiose for saving the world. Considering the fact that Hallie takes care of the welfare of the people, Codi states, "She [Hallie] made you [people] look beyond what you could see" (13). Notably, although Hallie held a Master's degree in Integrated Pest Management, she left Codi to teach the locals of Nicaragua about how to grow crops without wrecking the soil. Codi then highlights that Hallie does this without any remuneration and also notes that she wants to be part of a new society.

When talking about some of Hallie's impassioned letters to Codi on the political situation in Nicaragua, there appears a major foreign policy issue. Throughout the 1980s, the U.S. policy towards Nicaragua was at the forefront of public debate. The people of Nicaragua had received their estates six-seven years ago when the dictatorship was ousted, and the land was thus distributed among the people. Among the people, the farmers were the ones who needed a great deal of help back then because of several cross-border attacks by soldiers.

In a latter part of the novel, Barbara introduces another character, Emelina, with a view to add an earthy sense of humor. Emelina, an old high school friend of Codi, had arranged a "little fiesta" for Labor Day weekend. Codi helps Emelina in arranging the fiesta, where she comes across her old love Loyd. In the fiesta Codi overhears the men talking about "poison ground" and "fruit drop". People's paradise is now a threatened place. The owners of Black Mountain Mining Company have polluted the town's river with sulfuric acid, "Do you know how much sulfuric they put in the river? He said the EPA give Black Mountain thirty days to shut down that leaching operation" (63), and rather than paying the taxes to clean it up, they have decided to divert the water and that destroy the orchards of Grace. The fruit trees and the fruit drop are represented as the children; it mainly focuses on Codi's lost child and the green nuts on the ground are basically of miscarried children of future Grace.

Kingsolver's music interest shifted to biology; she enrolled in a doctoral program in evolutionary biology and ecology at the University of Arizona. She switches her interest to Codi as a teacher of biology, she takes the students to collect the river water samples to teach them about plant and animal kingdoms, to start with protozoans and the blue-green algae. On the contrary, a strange panic strikes her when she sees no microorganisms under powerful magnification. She is in disbelief that, "our water is dead" (109), and wonders, "What the hell is going on with this river" (110). The pH level of the river water shocks Codi as it was "hair higher than battery acid" (110). She finds it hard to believe that the poisoning from Mining Company resulted in the biotic death of the river.

The Black Mountain Mining Company relentlessly pursues its own interests despite responsibilities it has to the human community that is adversely affected by mining activities. Mining Company had been "running sulfuric acid, which is clear, corrosive, water-miscible acid, through their tailing piles to recover extra copper. It combines to make copper sulfate which is also known as 'blue vitriol'. People used to use this to kill rats and pond algae and about everything else you can name" (176). Sulfuric acid is one of the strongest mineral acids in the world. It is extremely corrosive and toxic. The sulfuric acid has huge implications for the environment and biodiversity. The river in Grace is polluted by H₂SO₄, the molecular formula of sulfuric acid by the selfish motive of the mining company. The natural resources are being used for the economic growth leading to the degradation of the environment.

Kingsolver introduces nature as the source of everything in life, from one's sense of belonging to the modern notion of fashion. Abbey's significant statement states that "When a man must be afraid to drink freely from his country's rivers and streams that country is not fit to live" (202). The wealthy industrialist must realize that their action endangered both nature and fellow human being. It is indispensable to "care for the earth because, animals, plants and entire ecosystem are valuable for their own sake" (Bouma-Prediger 165). The Black Mountain Mining Company owners decide to construct a dam to divert the toxic river, which will leave the town without agriculture water supply. Grace, which is set in a fertile valley, faces a serious environmental problem. Codi informs about the serious condition to women of Stich and Bitch club that "your trees knew all this way before we did. Watering them from the river is just like acid rain falling on them... The acid rain problem here in the west comes mostly from mine smelters. It's the same acid, one way or the other, sulfuric acid" (176). This affects the total demolition of agriculture system.

The eco-critics state that for the first time in human history, no true wilderness any longer exists on the planet, for every region is affected by global warming and other anthropocentric problems such as toxic waste and nuclear fallout. The valley of Grace gradually succumbs to the ecological assault of its greenery. While teaching in class Codi gives simple analogy to drive home the fact that the ozone layer damage is disastrous. She relates how just like the way a smelter protects his body from a thousand degree hot metal by wearing coveralls and a big shield over his face, the earth protects itself from the sun's harmful rays by the atmosphere's ozone layer. Codi remarks, "the ozone layer is a big face shield in the sky.... And it's slipping away from us. There's a big hole in it over the South Pole. When you use a spray you can make the hole bigger" (256). This is because of the emission of harmful acids from the industries.

The Men of Grace town does not take the responsibility; their concern over the 'fruit drop' seems unworthy. The Men of the community are content to use officially sanctioned methods of law suits in order to address the problem of the dam. But the women refuse to wait for ten years that these avenues will take to pursue. Instead they take matters into their own hands. The men of Grace assume that, they can't stop the company because they call the Black Mountain as "the Mountain" (162). But the woman of Grace complains, "These men...think the trees can die and we can just go somewhere else, and as long as we fry up the bacon for them in the same old pan, they think...that it would be home" (179). These women's heroic action arises out of affiliation with home. For Kingsolver, only love for a place and its people gives ordinary human beings the courage to move mountains. Codi is instrumental because of her knowledge about the biology and the chemistry involved in the pollution, the women organized themselves. They come up with the idea to sell their local craft, peacock piñatas, in Tucson to raise money.

By the time they were back in Grace on the last evening but, I was later informed, the Stitch and Bitch club had already laid plans to come back in ten days with five hundred peacock piñatas. There would only be two deviations from the original plan. First, each piñata would be accompanied by a written history of Grace and its heroic struggle against the Black Mountain Mining Company. (195)

The Stitch and Bitch club's weapons are peacock-feather piñatas, products of the town's peculiar cultural heritage. Selling these on the streets of Tucson, they bring attention to their cause and to their town, which along with its orchards is named to the National Register of Historic Places and protected accordingly. Through this discussion Barbara clearly highlights the relationship between women and nature. From this view point one understands that the land is often considered as a feminine in nature. 'Fruit drop' is also considered as the child death of Grace, because the trees have its fertility like women, both nurtures the life but is owned by man as property. Men's discussion makes a state of transformation in Codi's view of Grace.

Codi thinks her as an outsider of Grace but after listening to Men's concept, her alienation to the land is left and starts a perception of the insider. Her relationship with the land helps her to forget the past scars. Her reasoning awakes "people can forget and forget, and forget and forget but the land has a memory. The lakes and rivers are still hanging on to the DDT and every other insult we ever gave them" (225). These words arise from the hearts of Codi and make her more an insider than an outsider.

Codi understands that her past in initiating and leading the troop of women was a personal and a collective victory. As a biology teacher she teaches various lessons and she notes "I am teaching them how to have cultural memory... I want them to be the custodians of the earth" (332). She taught them ecological crisis and conservations. Through Codi, Barbara tries to tell the reader about the various activities of human being that affect the nature. Codi does her best to champion nature's cause. When the kids says trees grow back she replies,

Sure. Trees grow back, even a whole rain forest could grow back, in a couple of hundred years may be. But who's going to make it happen? If you had to pay the real price for those jeans the cost and the time of bringing that mountain back to life instead of leaving it dead. Those pretty jeans would have cost you hundred dollars. (255)

Codi's passionate heart share her thoughts with her students, she makes them see things in the right perspective. She provokes them to think and respond to another instance of nature abuse. Through her role, Barbara voice out to the readers about what goes behind the making of luxury products help the class to see nature destruction on a larger perspective. Codi connects the facts to their consciousness and makes them feel serious about it. Codi speaks about the stone-washed jeans and oil consumption to the students where Codi quotes,

They wash them in a big machine with this special kind of gravel they get out of volcanic mountains. The prettiest mountains you ever saw in your life. But they are fragile, like a big pile of sugar. Levi Strauss or whoever goes in there with the bull dozers and chainsaw and cuts down the trees and rips the mountainside to hell, so that all of us

lucky Americans can wear jeans that look like somebody threw them in the garbage before we got them. (254)
Think about the gas you put in car... The real cost. Not just pumping it out of the ground and refining it and shipping it, but also cleaning up the oil spills and all the junk that goes into air when it gets burned. That's part of what it costs, but you're not paying it. Gas ought to be twenty dollars a gallon, so you're getting a real good deal. But soon the bill comes due, and we pay it, or we eat it. The ultimate MasterCard. (255)

In contrast to this process of ripping materials natural substance out of the ground, making them into something unnatural, and then returning the waste products to the earth in an indigestible form. All in the name of economic progress and profit. Barbara presents the very different attitude that Native Americans have towards earth. At first the difference puzzles Codi. She asks Loyd how it can be that a canyon on Navajo tribal land has remained productive for over a thousand years, but Grace is being destroyed after only a century. She later learns the difference that Native Americans respect the earth as a living being and seek with humility to maintain the ecological balance that the earth needs.

In the novels end, Grace is registered it with the federal government as a Historic Place. Dr. Homer losses his memory. Hallie gets kidnapped by the contras, shoot to death and buried in Nicaragua at her own request. Hallie remains only a memory throughout the novel. Codi learns that the complete humans must not only understand their personal heritage, they must also align themselves and their communities with the laws, structures, and process that operate in the natural world. The elusive secret of peace of mind lies in the mysterious congruence between the human and the natural worlds. She continues to teach biology in the Local high school and is united with Loyd.

In many mythologies trees were regarded as the very embodiment of the immortal life force. Their recurrent seasonal cycle of flowering, leafing, fruiting and seeming decay during the winter months followed by renewal and apparent rebirth each spring provided a living metaphor for the seasons of human life. If the environment degrades, there will be the negative impact on the health of the people. Ecofeminism emphasizes on the natural connections between women and nature. In contemporary society, preserving and protecting nature and respecting women are practiced as traditional wisdoms. Nature is feminized because it is seen as possessing the same qualities as women. Women are noted for their pure, gentle, kind, graceful, simple and beautiful qualities. Nature possesses the same qualities within itself. Therefore nature is embodiment of all the characteristics that women possess.

Barry Commoner's first law "Everything is connected to everything else" can be applied to the plot of the novel. The law, which is also the "law of interdependence", simply means that everything existing in the world is connected in one or the other way, sometimes it is obvious fact that all are interconnected with in ecosystem, thereby creating a chain of reactions resulting in a self-stabilizing bio network. The nature is highly polluted by sulfuric acid in this novel. Destruction of the river leads to the destruction of Grace and the people of Grace. When the fertile land is watered, it turns into 'poison ground' leading to 'fruit drop'. Hence it is clear that once should take care of the other. All living things have their own value. From Barbara's novel *Animal Dreams* one should consider the nature as their own and they should preserve it from decaying.

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