

## Intertwined Panorama of Women and Nature in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*

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### Abstract

*The Bean Trees* is one of Barbara Kingsolver's critically acclaimed novels that received the American Library Association Award for its special appeal to adults. The novel portrays the esthetic view of nature and culture of the people in Kentucky in a hilarious way. In this novel, the author describes the key issues which include the plight of immigrants, racism and self-identity of a woman through different characters. This paper explores the inherent importance of underlying relationship between woman and nature, and comparing the symbiotic connection between them.

**Keywords:** Immigrants, Social Community, Woman and Nature

Literature is a platform for connecting human communities regardless of religion, caste and gender. It entertains, educates and enthralls the reader with humour and actions in real time. Furthermore, literature transcends across countries and continents, analyse the insights of the antiquity of culture. Literary criticism not only reveals the insight of individuals and social characters but of the character itself. It also evolves the identity of people, complex interaction between characters, consequence of action, lifestyle, recording the traces of nature. Janani Ramanathan expresses her views on literary criticism: "The more subtle the message, the more powerful it comes across" (Janani 41). Literature teaches the past, understands the present and empowers to create the future and it provides the knowledge and understanding of the human and the natural world. Milton Albrecht points out that literature reflects the society and it influences its dimensions. Françoise d'Eaubonne is a French feminist who first introduced the word "Ecofeminism" in 1974. It addresses the large scale of violence inflicted on woman in the male dominated world. Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature.

Kingsolver is a famous American novelist and eco-feminist whose novels are elegant, thought provoking, inspiring and portrays the women who are oppressed in the society. *The Bean Trees* (1988) is one of her famous novels which is woman centric as it deals with the ordeal of women. The author addresses the symbiotic relationship between nature and woman in her novels through different characters. Furthermore, she underlines the hardship of women facing in the society which includes self-identity, gender discrimination, oppression, male chauvinism, ethnic suppression, color and creed. She interlinks the nature and woman in many scenes throughout the novel in a brilliant and effective way.

The novel revolves around the character Taylor from Kentucky who wants to start a better life in Tucson, Arizona. The novel records the voyage between these two places and ends with Taylor evolving into a responsible mother. Taylor is a determined woman who works in Pittman County hospital in Kentucky for five and half years as a lab technician. When she decides to leave Kentucky for the better life, she starts her journey in her old car and it broke down at Oklahoma. After repairing the car, she finds a lady placing a baby in her car. The baby seems to be raped and with no movement but Taylor looked at the baby intensely and later identifies that it was a living child. Taylor names the baby as Turtle. During the travel, Taylor meets Mattie the owner of Jesus Lord Tire shop for replacing old tires, and thereby both become friends. Taylor and Mattie understand each other and a new bonding is established between them. Behind the tire shop, Mattie constructed a very good garden, where Turtle has first uttered the word Bean. In addition, Mattie is a member of Sanctuary Movement, the organization originally meant for helping immigrants. Later, Taylor meets Lou Ann who was separated from her husband Angel, lives with her son Dwayne Ray. Taylor and Lou Ann looks for a job and eventually they work as a waitress in a mall. Edna and Virgie Mae are the neighbors of Taylor, who take care of the children Turtle and Dwayne Ray during their mother's work shift in the mall. Estevan and Esperanza agree to disguise as the relative of Turtle and accomplishes the legal adoption of the child Turtle to Taylor in Armistead's office. The novel comes to an end with Taylor and Turtle moving back to their new home and family in Tucson. Kingsolver concludes the novel with a song by Turtle about vegetable soup that includes the names of people in her life and mentions Taylor as the main ingredient.

Barry commoner's first law of ecology "everything is connected to everything else", stresses the dependence of human on nature and the nature is not dependent with human. In essence, women have been long associated with the nature and emotionally bounded, and connected with mother earth. Val Plumwood expresses this connection with nature as a chain of things in terms of specification, passion or emotion, body, pre-symbolic, animal, and nature as the feminine.

The novel *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver emphasises the need for protecting the mother earth and nature. Importantly, the author portrays the beautiful nature of vegetable garden through the character Mattie who loves her garden: "Outside was a bright, wild wonderland of flowers and vegetables and auto parts. .... was all overgrown with cherry-tomato vines" (BT 45,46).

The playful moments of Kingsolver's infancy is demonstrated by the character Taylor who goes for fishing and catches blue grills and brass with the extensive use of her knowledge in biology. Furthermore, Taylor encounters the dream world of trying to walk as Jesus walked on the surface of the sea. Kingsolver makes use of her biology background in the narration of Taylor's working experiences in Pittman hospital for diagnosis and observation with X-rays.

The plight of single parenting is related in the novel with how a tree grows in forests in a protective climate. Nature offers support to the growth of the plant. Similarly, the mother of Taylor determines that Taylor provided a conducive environment to grow with the expectation of "hung up [the moon] in the sky and plugged in all the stars"(BT 10). Taylor understands her mother's wish and completes high school and goes to the Pittman County hospital to seek for a job. As Taylor's mother encourages her to apply she applies for a position and work five and a half years there as labtechnician. When she adopts Turtle as her infant, the mother's determination is seen in Taylor's mind. This shows the sense of persistence and firmness of purpose in single parenting.

The novelist illustrates the nature of desert and park with the characters Taylor, Mattie and the refugees Esperanza and Estevan. The broad view and pleasant nature of the park is illustrated as:

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 mounts and hillocks, its life lines and heart lines of dry stream beds". (BT 161)

Through these characters, Kingsolver again uses her knowledge of history and expertise in biology to create a stunning sight in which she narrates the plain desert as "palm spread out for a fortuneteller to read" (BT 161). She describes lightning as "white ribbons"(BT 161) and personifies the mesquite trees as capable of "shiver," (BT 161) just like a person who would be cold.

Furthermore, the author relates woman with flora, fauna and quail bird. The term Flora refers to the goddess of plant with native indigenous in a region. The Quail birds are active and beautiful with short, curved beaks and they spend time with their pairs. They face dangers from many predators like snake, dog, cat, fox and human. The comparison of Flora with woman is exemplified in the same way woman is adorable like goddess, creator of generations and the world is revolving around the woman. Similarly, the author compares the woman with the Quail bird. Generally, the bird living with pairs, mating, hatching and feeding its chicks. In the same way, women play many roles like better life partner and caregiver. Literature portrays woman as Durga with multiple hands, and playing multiple roles namely mother, wife, creator, administrator, home maker. The author spontaneously relates the role of a woman with the Flora plant and Quail bird. This clearly shows her affinity with the nature.

Karren J Warren, an ecofeminist who addresses the environmental issues, ecological destruction, animal exploitation which are related to the woman who faces racism, heterosexism, colonialism in day to day life. In Kingsolver's novels, the idea of connecting symbiotic relations is articulated clearly between women and nature. The author argues that the idea of authority must be re-structured and stress the need of nurturing collaborative ties instead of power dynamics. Eco-feminists portray women using animal terms such as cows, foxes, chickens, snakes, bitches, beavers, old bats, pussycats, cats, bird-brains, hare-brains. In *The Bean Trees*, the author using the names of turtle, poppy, horse, bear, rock, snake, lizard, chicken shows that women are related with the animals and nature.

In the novel, *The Bean Trees* Kingsolver introduces the character Turtle who is an abandoned baby nurtured by Taylor, the protagonist. The nature and green environment is exemplified by the author in many occasions. The baby Turtle recites the first word Bean and progresses toward uttering the entire tree names in the garden. The character Mattie is portrayed as a lover of gardening and the owner of beautiful garden constructed at the backyards of her house through these characters the writer reveals the association between nature and woman. Furthermore, the way the bean tree is yielding its fruit, the same way woman grows like a bean tree and serves the family and society till the end of her life.

Kingsolver's expertise in biology is exposed in her usage of biological terms in her novels to connect natural world and human society. The human society is intertwined with culture and nature. If any of them is damaged, it reflects other and vice-versa. The Ecofeminist literature is of the view that the relationship must be nurtured and re-structured. Moreover, the author stresses the need for creating communal relationship and it should be transcending beyond the boundaries. The novel focuses on love of nature and aims for communal relationship between indigenous people and young generation.

Kingsolver relates the woman's predicament with the nature in a very natural and spontaneous way. Taylor brings Turtle for medical examination due to the assumption that

the baby is being raped before she was kept in her car. She thought that the baby was two years old, however the x-ray report proved that her age was around three years. The x-ray was observed by the doctor through the window light and eventually uttering the word “failure to thrive”(BT 123). Taylor saw the nature of a bird which has built its nest in the cactus tree. Basically, it was difficult for a bird to build a nest in dense of thorns of cactus tree. In this incident, the author once again emphasises the deplorable predicament of woman in the male dominated society and their pathetic state is like thorns peeling the birds feathers. In the same way women in the society is full of hurdles ,lack of security and thorns in their life.

The famous American writer Leslie Silko Marmon addresses the features of the landscape in her novel *Landscape, History and the Pueblo Imagination*. The author relates the landscape with the pueblo people, which help them to remember the culture and its tradition. Similarly, Kingsolver portrays the aesthetic view of the park in the novel *The Bean Trees*. Earlier the park is named as Roosevelt park and then it was called as Dead grass park. Later, it was renamed as Dog Doo Park. The author narrates the park as “awful”(BT 110) in nature as the grass of the park seems as “animal with the mange”(BT 111). Here, the author relates the vicinity of the park with the life cycle of a woman in a society who faces difficulties from the childhood till the end of their life. It shows the affection and love of animals and environment. The Dog Doo Park miracle, for instance, is "a purplish lip of petal stuck out like a pout from a fat green bud"(BT 113). The imagery view of the park is portrayed as "giant, friendly hippo butts,"(BT 91) and cottonwood trees "cooled their heels"(BT 91) in the water.

The author portrays the view of the park in the month of March for relaxation. The characters Taylor, Mattie and Lou Ann along with their children Turtle, the gifted baby and Dwayne Ray, son of Lou Ann visited the park. The author illustrates the view of the park as, “the gravel path cut through the middle of the park from a penis-type monument” (BT 113). which is near to the house of Mattie. However, they prefer to sit in a place called Arbor. While describing about Arbor, the author beautifully explains the aesthetic view of the wood work. In the above statement, the author politely ignores the nature of the monument. It is a male genital organ monument. This shows the male dominance in the region of Tucson.

The park seems as desert and the Wisteria vines tree also looks dead, but Lou Ann always tells that “just you wait”(BT 113). During the month of March the wine tree seems that sprouted and it is ready to bloom. The bees surrounded the flower bud and waiting for blooming. The author reminds it with bible story “somebody or others struck a rock and the water poured out”(BT 113-114). This clearly shows that the love and affection of the author with the Mother Nature. Furthermore, the author relates the wine tree with the woman as it grows and supports other plants. Similarly, woman always depend upon others, it may be father, mother, husband, friend, children so that they can overcome the difficult situation in their life.

Helen Dunmore, an Orange prize awardee for fiction (1996) describes woman and nature in her novel *A Spell of Winter by Helen Dunmore*. The author portrays how the characters Cathe and Bob have strong association with their life and the nature. Similarly, in the *The Bean Trees* novel, the writer expresses the deep sense of association between nature and woman through the characters.

Kingsolver emphasized to build community at large is narrated in her novels. Taylor, Lou Ann, Mattie, Estevan, and Esperanza are connected as a community and the children Turtle and Dwayne Ray are taken care by Edna poppy and Virgie Mae. This shows the bonding with family members and endorsing the protective environment given to the baby.

Before Taylor and Lou Ann leave for Oklahoma for Turtle's legal adoption, Virgie Mae asks them to see what was on the front porch. They saw the night-blooming cereus, a most beautiful plant that only blooms once in a year. According to Lou Ann, the spectacular sight gives a positive connotation to Taylor's journey to Oklahoma expecting that "something good"(BT 12) is going to happen.

Kingsolver highlights the pathetic story of immigrant's plight in her novel *The Bean Trees*. She reveals how the fundamental rights of individuals is denied for the citizen of the land by the dominant forces. Furthermore, the novel portrays the difficulty of the citizen of Cherokee nations and their rights are ploughed by a single law, which is executed for bringing down the millions of aboriginals in their own homeland. The struggle of a refugee is narrated well in the novel. The problem they face in real life include restricted life, insecurity, lack of jobs, food, shelters, living in hideouts, physical and mental torture and also commute through underground road. They are arrested, deported and also killed.

Kingsolver portrays how the political power abuses the immigrants through the conversation between the characters Estevan and Taylor. Estevan remembers how he was tortured in Guatemala using electrical wires, which was used in United States for field telephones. In the above incident, Kingsolver describes the abuse of political powers over the immigrants. He also describes that Turtle looks like Ismene, Estevan and Esperanza's daughter, who was abducted during a raid in their village.

Kingsolver describes the tailored nature of interdependency among woman who has difference of opinion and manner of conduct. The independent, rigid personality of Taylor appears to erase on Lou Ann, who is shy and meek in general. The character Edna poppy, Taylor's neighbor relies on others because of her poor eye sight. She is also taken care of by Virgie Mae, who is also a neighbor to Taylor and Lou Ann. During their work shifts in the mall, Taylor and Lou Ann gave their babies, Turtle and Dwayne to these two elderly ladies. These characters are dependent on each other and this demonstrates how a natural relationship has been formed.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* novel underline the identity, refugee in post colonialism. He displays the violence faced by the people and their dislocation during partition. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* starts with clear discussions of migration by mentioning that his distant ancestors, originally from Bangladesh, "were ecological refugees long before the term was invented"(Ghosh 3). Ghosh illustrates the deteriorating effect of displacement on refugees who live on the fringes of society. For example, in *The Hungry Tide*, the dispersal of weak, disenfranchised people belonging to the lowest ranks of East Pakistani society creates existential difficulties for them. Ghosh reflects this feeling of being unwanted, unwelcomed by the pathetic plight of East Pakistani refugees trying to migrate to Sundarbans in Bengal. Similarly in *The Bean Trees* novel, the author illustrates the Cherokee nation people's fundamental rights are ploughed by the US authorities by a single law and living as a immigrant in their own native land. Both of the novelist underlines the trauma of the immigrants through the characters Estevan and Esperanza in *The Bean Trees* novel, through the character Tridib in *The Shadow Lines* novel Ghosh Portrays the plight of the immigrants.

Nature and woman both have the powerful force of patience and perseverance. It is a powerful force for the existence of human life. Woman should be protected to deliver the human for generation to generations. Without these two the world cannot be existed. Destruction of these two in any form is not accepted and it will be a self-implosion. Kingsolver as an eco-feminist who exposes the natural connections between the nature and woman. The attacks in nature revert back to backstab the human life. Any form of attack in nature such as deforestation, mining, industrialization, air pollution, electronic waste leads the destruction of environment. These factors resulted into climate change which causes

precipitation of rainfall, rising sea level, rising of temperature and so on. Any form of attacks on woman in a community at large leads to gender inequality, lack of education and social inequality. As an effective eco-feminist writer, Kingsolver seeks to build the human community and reconnect them with the natural world.

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