

An Ecofeminist Study of Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

^aB.B Sagade, ^bN.C Deshmukh

^aAssistant Professor, Department of English, New Arts, Commerce and Science College Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, India

^bAssistant Professor, Department of English, Shri Muktanand Arts, Science and Commerce College Gangapur Dist. Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

This paper deals with the study of Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* through ecofeministic perspective. It focuses on the relationship between women and nature. Barbara Kingsolver eradicates gender discrimination and its binary oppositions. The novel also shows the harmful effects of pesticides on the body of women and animals. This paper studies some aspects of ecofeminism reflected in *Prodigal Summer*. The paper also explores how Barbara has presented nature through different angles. The novel emphasizes on the domination of women and nature by the patriarchal society. The paper also points out women's relation with the human and the non human world.

KEYWORD: Ecofeminism, Gender discrimination, Patriarchy.

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* deals with understanding the nature. The three main characters in the novel spend much of their time studying and thinking about the nature that surrounds them. At the beginning of the novel Kingsolver gives accurate descriptions of the various flora and fauna that surround the characters during the rebirth and renewal in the spring season. Barbara continues with the same amount of detail and analysis of the natural world during the different seasonal cycles. The characters have integrated with the surrounding of nature.

The women characters show a great amount of respect and understanding for the world around them. Their lives revolve around the crops, wildlife and weather of Appalachia Mountain. Some of them protect their homes, families and livelihoods and others live to protect and understand the natural world.

Deanna is the central character in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Prodigal Summer*. Deanna is divorced and exploited by her husband. Her husband does not understand her work, he does not want to give her education. He always discouraged her. Deanna leaves the human contact and lives in the Zebulon National Forest. She works as a forest ranger and is very happy in her job. She has created the job herself through her college thesis on protecting wildlife, specifically Coyotes. The Zebulon National Forest is situated in the Appalachians Mountains. Deanna is more comfortable around the plants and flowers of the Zebulon Mountain. She has easily spent two years in the forest without communication with humans. She has a deep love for animals. She can distinguish one carnivore from another simply based on their tracks and the scent of the urine. When the birds sing around her, she can identify which bird is singing. In the early morning Deanna listens to song of the birds. She is enchanted by the melodious singing of the birds such as Carolina Chickadees and vireo.

The presence of wood thrushes gives immense pleasure to her. Deanna has a love for nature since her childhood. She takes care of the Coyotes. She is worried about

Coyotes because they are going to be extinct. She becomes upset when she sees that local farmers kill the Coyotes. She knows that Coyotes are exceptionally rare in the part of the Appalachians. She is very much delighted when she sees a coyote in solitude. Deanna does not like the people's action of logging the Chestnut trees. She tells Eddie that trees maintain the ecological balance, and without trees we can't breathe in oxygen. The trees are necessary for the rain also.

Lusa cares to live in harmony with nature. As a farmer she likes to grow and sell something that is truly useful to mankind. She resists growing tobacco in the field which is harmful to the human beings. When Herb and Ricky insists her for taking the crop of tobacco she explains them that though it gives profits but the effects are harmful to the human beings. She tells them that it causes cancer so she thinks that government should ban on the crop of tobacco. She recommends the sweet corn instead of tobacco. Lusa learns about goat farming and also meets Garnett to get the knowledge about it. Her choice in raising the goats for religious feasts reflects her desire to provide people with something that are good for them, both physically and spiritually. She tells farmers about ecofarming.

Nannie Rawley talks about how the bees are going to be extinct. She resists Garnett's action to fumigate the hives on the wall of the church. Garnett wants to collect honey from the hives but he uses chemical and it kills the bees directly. Nannie Rawley tells him the natural method of smoking to extract the honey from the hives. She says that bees are the main part of their environment. Bees work to maintain the balance of esological system so it is the duty of every human being to protect bees and not to kill them. Nannie also tries to save salamanders from extinction. Annie claimed that there were ten of fifteen kinds of salamanders are in the list of endangered species.

Kingsolver's women characters play a very significant role in protecting the nature. They take care of the nature and deeply devoted to save nature and animals. Women in *Prodigal Summer* are more connected with nature. They are more aware about the ecological system.

Kingsolver removes the gender discrimination in *Prodigal Summer*. Jewel is dying so she requests Lusa to take care of her son and daughter. Lusa accepts to Lowell as his son and Crystal as daughter. Crystal is a child who defies gender characterizations. Crystal feels she is not a girl but a boy. Jewel follows heterosexist discourse and gender binaries. She says to Lusa about her daughter, "Her first word was no, and her second was dress. No dress. No dolls, no pretty hair bows. I gave in on that haircut because she was cutting it herself. I was afraid she'd poke her eyes out" (*Prodigal Summer* 122).

According to Lusa gender is created by the society. Every person is the mixture of feminine and male qualities. Lusa observes Crys and she tries to remove the prejudice of Crys from Jewel's mind. But Jewel and her husband do not ready to accept this matter. This shows that Jewel and her husband follow the heterosexual attitude towards sex. But Lusa as a Cryst's adoptive mother demonstrates opposing arguments about gender discourse. Jewel repeats stereotypical conventions where as Lusa allows for alternative and varied possibilities around Crys's gender and sexuality. She accepts Crys whatever Crys is.

Kingsolver through the character of Crys, breaks through deep rooted restrictions and accepted assumptions around male and female sexuality. In this regard **Judith Butler**

argues that gender is a sign, a reiterated and socially reinforced performance. She deconstructs gender in her book *Bodies That Matter*:

Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond ...This is a "girl" however who is compelled to "cite "the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is not the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a norm. (232)

Through Lusa's response Kingsolver undermines recognizable notions of femininity and creates a new concept of gender. Crys is a girl who does not like to be a girl. She wants to behave like a boy. Lusa perhaps understands the emotions of Crys and she deconstructs stereotypical sexual roles.

Barbara Kingsolver sheds light on the use of pesticides as well as insecticides in agricultural field. In her attempt to show that how the use of pesticides is very harmful not only to the human beings but it also destroys the natural cycle of the environment.

In *Prodigal Summer* farmers know the agricultural change in the Appalachian region. But they are reluctant to change. The U.S Agricultural Extension Service has promoted the people to use insecticide on the tobacco crops but that harms the other crops. It kills the beneficial pollinators which are necessary to organic orchard growers like Nannie Rawley. Nannie Rawley notices that Garnett sprays Sevin dust package on his farm at end of every week. She strictly warns him,"If I get lung cancer, it will be on your conscience" (*Prodigal Summer* 275)

It not only destroys Nannie's organic apple farm but also songbirds. If any species is removed from the earth it affects on the total ecological system. It is said that DDT has made the harmful effects on Nannie's child. Nannie tells Garnett not to spray DDT on the farm. Though the Garnett understands the side effects of the DDT on her child but he doesn't stop to spray.

Lusa sees the farmers are spraying the pesticides on the farm. She sees that some people are propagating the idea that pesticides are multiplying their production but lusa knows that application of pesticides disturb the ecological system.

The high cost of chemical herbicides and insecticides has driven many farmers out of business. It also caused cancers to some of the inhabitants in town Egg Fork. Kingsolver points out that ignorance of harmful effects of pesticides have created complex environmental problems. It created ecological imbalances in the natural environment. Kingsolver uses her main female characters Nannie, Lusa, and Deanna make aware the local people about its harm. Kingsolver gives the message that if the environment is protected then the farmers can be prospered. She wants to bring balance in the environmental system.

Prodigal Summer focuses on the serious issue of destruction of nature. Kingsolver has shown that mountains are disappearing in the Zebulon County because coal companies have cut down the mountains through the procedure of surface mining. In surface mining the soil and rock is removed above a mineral deposit. The Mountaintop is removed and coal is separated from the removed rock and the rock is thrown away into surrounding valleys. It has demolished the surrounding land and the social ecosystem. The Coal companies consistently continued surface mining for large

profits. In Appalachian region even today the same environment has become endangered by the Coal mining industry today.

Barbara Kingsolver describes how human use natural resources mercilessly and sell them for their own profits. In *Prodigal Summer* the protagonist Garnett Walker and his family logged the American chestnut trees on their land to the point of extinction. In the Appalachian mountain region native people are more connected with the nature. But the competition has been going on among various coal mining companies for extracting coal from the mountains. These people have destroyed the nature as well as indigenous culture. So there is threat to the indigenous people's lives also. The tendency of removing the mountaintop is the result of anthropocentrism. In anthropocentrism human beings are considered as superior and other species are supposed as insignificant. Anthropocentrism promotes the people to conquer over nature and manipulate it for the special benefits of human beings. Kingsolver has resisted anthropocentrism. She has presented anthropocentric attitude in Garnett's family. Garnett's family has multiplied their wealth through selling the woods of American chestnut trees. The logging of the American chestnut and mountaintop elimination are both the result of short-term economic reasoning. People prefer the short-term profits first and do not think the environmental consequences for a long time. The coal miners destroyed millions of acres of land and deprived numerous animals and plant species of habitat. It caused soil erosion and surface runoff in the region. Kingsolver feels that if the Appalachian region has to be set in a well order people should change their attitude towards nature.

Kingsolver points out that the removal of mountaintop in the Appalachian region should be stopped. If the coal companies are allowed to remove the mountaintop then it will badly affect the lives of people around the world. It is the need to bring the sustainable energy development through environmental policies in order to avoid environmental problems.

Kingsolver has shown that native people are well harmonized with the nature. They understand the breathing of mountains also:

People in the Appalachia insisted that the mountains breathed, and it was true: the steep hollow behind the farmhouse took up one long, slow inhalation every morning and let it back down through their open windows and across the fields throughout evening –just one full ,deep breath each day.(*Prodigal Summer* 34)

Lusa learned the mountains breathing. She had some respect for the poetry of country people's language and for their different perceptions such as mountain's breathing and snake will not die till the sun goes down.

Lusa knows very well how the animals communicate with their mate through their scent signal. They identify their mates through the scent. She has learned this skill in such a way that she can experience the Coal's presence through his particular scent.

Conclusion ;

Prodigal Summer is an ecofeminist novel because it shows women are connected to the nature. It also shows how women resist the patriarchal society. Ecofeminism dismantles the patriarchal society. It has been also found that how the novel follows the ecofeminist idea for eliminating gender discrimination. It also points out the

harmful effects of the pesticides on the women as well as animals. The novel advocates for environmental protection.

Bibliography

- 1 Kingsolver Barbara. (2000), *Prodigal Summer*, Faber and Faber, London.
- 2 Butler Judith. (1993), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge, New York.
- 3 Mies Maria and Shiva Vandana. (2010). *Ecofeminism*, Rawat Publication, New Delhi.
- 4 Gaard Geeta. (1993), *Ecofeminism*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- 5 Eaton Heather and Lorentzen Lois Ann. (2003), *Ecofeminism and Globalization*, Rowman and Littlefield, U.S.A.
- 6 Carty Brian. (2002), *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Routledge, London.