



**Cultural Eco-Feminism in
Barbara Kingsolver's novel
*The Bean Trees***

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ABSTRACT

Barbara Kingsolver (1955) is described as a fantasist, postmodernist, and a feminist writer. She loved telling stories, but she was not merely a tale-spinner as she has often been described by the critics. She was well-read in the contemporary philosophical, critical and also feminist sphere. It is interesting to see how Barbara Kingsolver encodes her environmental and feminist thoughts in her writing.

The present paper modestly attempts to study Barbara Kingsolver's "The Bean Trees" as a cultural Eco-feminist novel. "The Bean Trees" is a speculative novel, which examines the issue of Eco-femininity. It focuses on the natural connection between women and nature as exclusive and unique and supports the concept of "Mother Earth". They argue that traditional wisdoms of preserving and protecting nature as well as respecting women should be practiced in our contemporary society. In Literature, women's writings have reflected the beautiful landscape and the connection between nature and women. "The bean trees" is Kingsolver's critical response to the universal tendencies in the Eco-feminist theories. Kingsolver presents in her novel an ideal modern society that is free from male domination and at the same time Kingsolver shows how women look to the nature in a particular way. Taylor the main character in Kingsolver's novel reflects the way that focus on creating a society in which women are treated as equals and have the same rights as men and her smooth attitude towards nature. Kingsolver uses her literature to express her feelings through her characters, specifically Taylor Greer, who resembles Kingsolver at a young age.

The paper concludes that Barbara Kingsolver's "The Bean Trees" manages to focus on several aspects of future earth in terms of female- nature relationship. The aim and main objective of the present study is analysis and



interpretation of the textual and conceptual essence of ecofeminism in brief in the selected novel of Barbara Kingsolver to achieve this, it is essential to explore relevant Eco-Feminist theories and perspectives through a detailed and vast literature survey. It is also proposes to draw attention to Kingsolver's novel as an example of Eco-feminism. It is based on the study of Kingsolver's novel "*The Bean Trees*".



Introduction

Throughout history, nature is portrayed as feminine; their reproductive capacities make women closer to nature than men. Both women and nature are life sustaining and resource giving but their role is often neglected in society. The human life has been affected by oppression for long time. The power that is levelled upon nature makes the same destruction that is similar to that resulting from the oppression of women. A society based on cooperation and balance rather than dominance for survival on this planet. Poverty of land and environment is one of the crucial problems that we face today. Technology, modern industry and war are some of the problems that results in the sterility of nature and the sterility of society comes from men's hostility towards women. Women are hurt most as they suffer double oppression of patriarchy, education, race and poverty.

Meanwhile literature reflects the foundation of society, a study of relationship between environment and women is a part of feministic studies. Eco-Feminism is a branch of literature where they form a relationship between environment and literature. It has developed as a literary movement which points to the common ground between environmentalism and feminism with some current linking deep ecology and feminism. Ecofeminism traces its beginning from the feminist movements such as the elimination of slavery and limit for defending the rights of women.

Eco feminism as an ideology and movement finds that the oppression of women is interlinked to the oppression of nature with the same masculine centered attitudes and practices concerning to the patriarchal society. This oppression is still there in the contemporary period. This paper attempts to explain Barbara Kingsolver's novels "The Bean Trees" in terms of Ecofeminism. It shows how women and nature are related to each other and how

both are oppressed by the patriarchal society in the same way and how women and nature both are showing resistance towards this dominance in their own ways. All the female characters in the novel are related and affected by nature in one or other ways¹.

Ecofeminism in the novel of Barbara Kingsolver

Theoretical Background

The term ecofeminism was coined by the famous French feminist Françoise d' Eaubonne in 1974. She used it “to call upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet”². The insight of linking women with nature contains to the times of archaic classical mythology. Nature is portrayed as a woman as its fundamental functions includes reproduction and nurture. Similarly women’s duties are planned as natural to her. Thus, the connection of nature and women is best described by the phrase: “Nature naturalizes women and women feminize nature”³. One approach to discuss the relation between women and nature is to understand the parallel behaviour they have been exercised into in patriarchal society. Women’s role has been to fulfill the demands and aspirations of men. Correspondingly, nature is supposed to have an innate constitution of catering to human needs. Hence, both women and nature are exploited by men leading to a mutual association between oppression of women and deterioration of nature.

Ecofeminism as an ideology and movement finds that the oppression of women is interlinked to the oppression of nature with the same masculine centered attitudes and practices linked to the patriarchal society. Françoise d'Eaubonne while forming the term “ecofeminism” in her book *Feminism or*

Death has described the significant part of feminism in addressing environmental and gender issues. Progressively, it has grown out of the definition of mere women and environment. The late 20th century has identified Ecofeminism as a movement that speaks for women, environment and all the marginalized groups, including queers.⁴

There are three main parts of Eco-feminism, which are significant in defining the connection between woman and nature. Cultural Ecofeminism, it focuses on the natural connection between women and nature as exclusive and unique and supports the concept of “Mother Earth”. They argue that traditional wisdoms of preserving and protecting nature as well as respecting women should be practiced in our contemporary society. Vandana Shiva describes in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* that “Nature as the feminine principle -Nature and women as producers of life – Gender ideology vs. the recovery of the feminine principle”.⁵

Constructivist Eco-feminist like Simone de Beauvoir rejects the essential connection of women and nature by stating that the connection is a mere social creation and not natural. She emphasize on the essentialist and negative impact of connecting women with nature as this could alienate her from culture by widening the man-woman and culture-nature binaries. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir points out

*“The passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is defined by man’s ability to think biological relations as systems of oppositions; duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry, whether occurring in defined or less clear form, are not so much phenomena to explain as fundamental and immediate givens of social reality.”*⁶

Socialist Eco-feminism stands somewhere in between Cultural and Constructivist Eco-feminism. It neither accepts nor rejects the natural connection between women and nature, by de-emphasizing the connection. Socialist ecofeminists, like Karen J Warren and Maria Mies, focus on the critical analysis of the western philosophies of development. Maria Mies writes about this nature-culture dilemma: “Since the Age of Enlightenment and the colonization of the world the White Man concept of liberation, of freedom and equality, is based on dominance over nature, and other peoples and territories.”⁷ The division between nature and culture, or civilization, is essential to this understanding. From the early women movement up to the present, a large section of women has accepted the strategy of catching-up with men as the main path to liberation. This implied that women must overcome within themselves what had been defined as nature, because, in this discourse, women were put on the side of nature, whereas men were seen as the representatives of culture.

Queer Ecofeminism visualizes a wide range of gender ranging from superman to superwoman, including lesbians, gay, bisexuals, transgender and cyborgs, and emphasize their connection towards environment. In the essay “Toward a queer ecofeminism”, Greta Gaard points out that the goal of this essay is to demonstrate that to be truly inclusive, any theory of ecofeminism must take into consideration the findings of queer theory. Similarly, queer theory must consider the findings of ecofeminism. To this end, the essay examines various intersections between ecofeminism and queer theory, there by demonstrating that a democratic, ecological society envisioned as the goal of ecofeminism will, of necessity, is a society that values sexual diversity and the erotic.⁸



Barbara Kingsolver "*The Bean Trees*"

Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955, and grew up in rural Kentucky. She earned degrees in biology from DePauw University and the University of Arizona, and has worked as a freelance writer and author since 1985. She has written various literary works; *The Bean Trees*, *Homeland*, *Animal Dreams*, *Another America*, *Pigs in Heaven*, *High Tide in Tucson*, *Prodigal Summer*, *Small Wonder*, *Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands*, with photographer Annie Griffiths Belt, *Animal*, *Vegetable*, *Miracle: A Year of Food Life* and *The Lacuna*.

The Bean Trees begins when Taylor decides that it's time to leave Pittman, Kentucky, where she lives with her mother, and make something of herself. She starts her personal journey of self-discovery, leaving everything behind, including her name. In the middle of Oklahoma, on land owned by the Cherokee Nation, Taylor's car breaks down. Taylor stops to have it repaired and to get something to eat at a restaurant. Her life changes dramatically when, sitting in her car and ready to leave the restaurant and continue driving, a Cherokee woman puts a child wrapped in a blanket on the front seat of Taylor's car. Suddenly, a strange woman comes and asks Taylor to take the baby. Taylor gets confused and the baby speaks nothing. Later on, Taylor names the baby Turtle.

Taylor and Turtle travel to Tucson, Arizona. During the journey, their car stops because of engine problem car problems, they reach to a business store named Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. The owner of the business, Mattie, a courageous and lovely person, finally hires Taylor. Taylor soon discovers that Mattie's shop is also a house for political refugees from Guatemala. Then she knows two refugees Estevan and Esperanza, Taylor becomes more aware of discrimination and social injustice. Looking for a place to live, Taylor responds to an advertisement in a newspaper and rents a room from Lou Ann Ruiz.



Taylor, Lou Ann and her young son make a sense of family. Gradually, the safe environment and the feelings that Taylor gives to Turtle pay off and Turtle starts to speak. She starts with the word bean then the name of vegetables. Someday, when Turtle is in the park with Lou, someone takes Turtle. Fortunately, Edna has a stick and uses it to hit the committer, setting Turtle free. After the attack, Turtle takes away and stops speaking. Because a social worker becomes involved in the case, it is exposed that Taylor has no legal right to keep Turtle and could lose her to the state if relatives are not found. Taylor with Turtle agrees to take Estevan and Esperanza to a safe house in Oklahoma. Taylor tries to find Turtle's relatives so that they can legally sign Turtle over to Taylor's care. Unfortunately, Turtle's relatives cannot be found. Taylor asks Estevan and Esperanza for help. They pose as Turtle's family and express their wish to relinquish custody of their daughter to their friend, Taylor. Taylor adopts Turtle and then takes Estevan and Esperanza to the safe house. In the car on the way home to Tucson, Turtle names vegetables, this time including the names of the people in her family.

Ecofeminist Analysis

Kingsolver's education as a biologist and her strong love for nature are prominent throughout the novel. Apart from the many beautiful images of the landscapes around the characters, the characters themselves also love the natural world and find peace when they are in natural environments. Her protagonist "Taylor" learns to engage herself into the environment when she moves to Arizona. Though the plants and wildlife in the desert are the polar opposite of the natural world in Taylor's original Kentucky home, Taylor is charmed with the plain beauty of this new landscape.

Cultural Eco-feminism insists that women are close to nature through their long-time social roles which are pregnancy, giving birth, raising children and

doing housework. Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival* “describes Eco-feminism by saying that it is the childbirth and industrialization of plant reproduction”⁹. Natural imagery in Barbara Kingsolver the *Bean Trees* compares women destiny with nature and giving 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 be 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”.*¹⁰

Cultural Eco-feminism can be seen clearly in the novel, the perfect use of the symbols such as animals, planting trees, birds, pigs, horses and the beautiful landscape show the connection between woman and nature. It also shows the suffering of woman and the threatening of nature. Turtle, who has considered to be a two year old female child, was harmed just because the baby was a girl, as birds are crushed under the wheels on the road just because they are not being bothered for. This girl child seduced, stands representing the whole of the feminine community in the world, who are dominated over. She was named for her grabbing ability as a mud turtle. Kingsolver's background as an ecologist and her strong love for nature 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.”*¹¹

The feminist views of Kingsolver could be seen clearly in the bean trees, Kingsolver's' characters are strong and independent women of modern age in America. Their strength and commitment to their non-traditional families are



extreme to their existence within the confines of society. By creating such a community for her woman in the novel, Kingsolver is able to bring out the significance of community to the life of each individual. Kingsolver 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. She describes in chapter one how Taylor's mother could manage herself after her husband left her. She used to work as a housekeeper to support Taylor and herself. The husband left Taylor's mother when he knew that she is pregnant. Her mother doesn't mind that Foster left; in fact, she often tells Taylor that

*"Trading Foster for [you] was the best deal this side of the Jackson Purchase."*¹²

As Taylor develops and is exposed to horrible things that fathers can say and do to children, she feels quite lucky to have grown up without a father. The attitude of Taylor's mother and her obligations to Taylor, as well as her strange attitude toward men, represent Kingsolver's feminist views. Here, the feminist perception in Kingsolver's novels has been observed. As a feminist writer, she tries to prove that woman can work and support herself even without the need of their husbands.

Kingsolver gives another view of feminism in her novel *The Bean Tress*. She depicts the trip of Lou Ann's from her doctor to show the sexual harassment of women in a male-dominated society. When Lou Anna was at the doctor clinic, the nurse gives her a booklet about some exercises that she has to do. The cover page of the booklet is a picture of a woman holding a baby. She says, such booklet should be "put together by men" who don't like the looks of pregnant women; none of the many pamphlets she's received from her doctor's office have pictures of pregnant women. As Lou Ann rides the bus, men don't look at

her directly, and males in general leave her alone. She decides that being able to ride a bus full of people without being sexually harassed is quite pleasant. Before she was pregnant, she couldn't ride the bus without being touched and criticized by men.

Kingsolver continues to practice her career as an ecologist. In chapter five of her novel, she talks about the natural history and biology to create images and symbols. She compares the railroad system in Tucson to hardened artery in a human body. She describes the environment when it affected by the unnatural factors and how the human beings have been affected by such pollution. She also gives a clear picture on how the industry and wrong used of resources could affect the nature and destroy the landscape. Here, Kingsolver interlinked the domination of male on both the woman and nature. As an ecofeminist writer, she tries to convey her message that woman tries to keep the environment as clean as possible and decrease the possibilities of destruction of the landscape.

"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".¹³

In the very beginning of chapter six of her novel, Kingsolver brings another picture of the destruction of the nature. She describes how the beautiful jungle turned to black. She also illustrates how woman does care of the 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 colourful jungle turned to black slime, especially on this of all days when people everywhere were sending each other flower, but it didn't faze Mattie".¹⁴

In chapter seven, Kingsolver presents the cultural ecofeminism in which woman is close to nature that is (Mother Earth). Taylor's connection with nature



is obvious, Taylor planting seeds “We are planting a garden just like Old MacDonald in your book, here’s squash seeds, here’s pepper seeds and here’s eggplants”¹⁵, that shows the deep connection of the nature with woman and native people. Eco-feminist writer Susan Griffin in her work *women and nature: the roaring inside her*, Griffin elucidates how women are mentally associated with nature more than man. Images of nature, birds, pigs, turtles, and horses are often used to explain the connection between woman and nature.

*“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 that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature.”*¹⁶

Cultural Ecofeminism asserts that all forms of oppression are connected and that structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality. Oppression of the natural world and of women by patriarchal power structures must be examined together or neither can be confronted fully. These socially constructed oppressions formed out of the power dynamics of patriarchal systems. In one of the first ecofeminist books, *New Woman New Earth*, Ruether, states: “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 demands 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”¹⁷.

Kingsolver shows the natural beauty of the landscape in chapter twelve of her novel. Mattie tells her friends to see the first rain, she takes them into the desert. Kingsolver’s description of the natural of the countryside, environment stands for her consciousness of the environment. Kingsolver illustrates the use

of figures of speech to give a clear description of the land. She uses mountain, city and the palm of a human hand to picture the beauty of the nature. Her phrase “resting in its cradle of mountains”¹⁸ likens the valley to a baby, and the phrases “city like a palm” and life lines and heart lines”¹⁹ suggest an adult. The land embodies a life lived from birth to death. 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 life lines and heart lines of dry stream beds.”*²⁰

In Kingsolver's novel *the bean trees*, she represents her writing style and technique through the main female character Taylor. The novel reveals under the oppression, racialism and classism women have experienced great hardships and misery in the process of searching for identity and struggling for freedom and equality. Taylor is a young clever girls moves away from the small-town community in Pittman, Kentucky to Tucson, Arizona. The Nature is being described very frequently in the novel. When hog died, it is one more death, of nature; the nature is also seen as a 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”*²¹

At the end of the novel, Kingsolver's knowledge of natural history is obvious. Taylor reads about the rhizobia, microscopic bugs that live on the roots of wisteria vines. Rhizobia makes a necessary part for 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



interdependence among people. The relationship between the rhizobia and the wisteria represents Taylor's positive and relationships with the many people she's met. Without the link of friends and family, she would not be 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.”*²²

In her book, *A Western Perspective on what it is and why it matters?* Karren J Warren states, “the theory of relating symbolic connections are brought out distinctly between women and nature in the novels of Barbara Kingsolver”²³. Eco-feminist literature asserts that the notion of power must be re-structured. Collaborative relationships should be nurtured instead of power dynamics”. Taylor states Kingsolver’s belief that modern human society has harmfully affected the nature and begins to learn about the ways that humans have harmed the subtle balance of the desert and ways that humans can help return the earth to its natural beauty. The description of the beauty of nature and the harsh balances of life and death in the natural world in Kingsolver’s novel has been respectfully described, as she always promotes for humans to become responsible promoter of the good and the bad in the nature. In chapter thirteen in Kingsolver’s novel, the birds killed in the roads of Tucson, Birds represent the freedom of nature, but this freedom is threatened by the limits of modern life in an American city like Tucson. Roads kill birds, whereas houses trap them in places that they don’t belong. Taylor sorrows a blackbird killed on the side of the road and tries to release a trapped song sparrow from her kitchen at moments when the institutions of modern life are most threatening to Taylor’s ability to hold on to her adopted daughter Turtle.

“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 no earthly reason to stop for a dead bird.”²⁴

Cultural Eco-feminism asserts that women are described in various terms that are close to nature and animals, for examples; rose, tree, cat and bird, by using such terms, it has become clear that woman treated as nature and oppressed by male domination. In the bean trees, Turtle resembles Cynthia as a cut.

“Cynthia had these tawny gold eyes like some members of the cat family, as certain fair-haired people do.”²⁵. “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, that someone had apparently sewn by hand. Turtle adored the doll and had named it, with no help from anyone, Shirley Poppy.”²⁶

Being an eco-feminist writer, Barbara Kingsolver emphasizes on the connection between women and nature by male-dominated society. Kingsolver provides a solution for the future of the world, she has suggested that woman and nature must be treated carefully and male-power must be retreated against women and nature. She also suggests that the mutual relationship between native people and the young generation should be considered. As well as, woman and nature should be protected from the challenges of male and industrial revolution, and men have to recognise the importance of women and nature.



Conclusion

Barbara Kingsolver links various Eco-feminist and feminist theories in her novel and she also seeks to provide solutions for empowerment woman and nature, she also suggests that the concept of power towards nature and woman must be re-structured. She gives a clear picture of the oppression of woman and nature and she examines the impact of technology that created recently on nature, Taylor has depicted a true picture of Mother Earth where woman in spite of her all duties and hard labour but she is still aware of keeping the nature safe environment.

It also could be concluded that cultural Eco-feminist point to form value for woman and nature will be given value bases and be independent living beings. Barbara shattered the stereotypical image of women and addresses her with strength, wisdom, and rebellious spirit of exploring themselves. There is an extrinsic relation and comparison between nature and female characters shown by the author. Birds, flowers, fire and most importantly water is very much associated with Taylor and other characters as well. Various themes have been explored by the author as, racial discrimination, women friendship, marriage and sex, self-growth, evil and goodness etc. Barbara's eco-feminist concern for nature has rarely been studied. Barbara's "The Been Trees" shows the relationship between female and nature from the peculiar angle of a woman writer. She also shows the victimized status of both women and nature.



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