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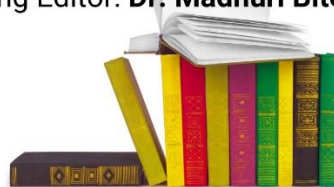
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The Motif of Learning from Nature in Barbara Kingsolver's Novels

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Abstract:

Barbara Kingsolver's writings consistently portray the world as a web of interrelationships. In her fiction, the evolving perceptions of her characters take shape through their close encounter with the natural world. This paper argues that Kingsolver's ecological vision informs all her novels, even if they are seemingly political. For Kingsolver, who believes "personal is political," simple things such as food choices and growing a garden are acts of political resistance. This paper shows that one main topos chosen by Kingsolver to convince her readers of her ecological vision is to make her protagonists grow by learning from Nature. Her characters evolve with a growing self-awareness about their place in the world. This motif is a constant in all her writings. In fact, it can be safely stated that Kingsolver's strongly held political beliefs may stagnate, but her treatment of Nature remains enchanting and ever-renewing.

Keywords: Interrelationship, Ecological, Nature, Identity, Human.

An essential feature of all nature writing is to read the natural world as a text. This method brings together the natural and the cultural. Gary Snyder delineates the lessons learned from the wild in his book *The Practice of the Wild*. He calls these lessons humanity's "etiquette of freedom" (25). These etiquettes can be learned by living a life in harmony with the natural

world. This balanced approach denies humans any superiority over the nonhuman. This worldview places humans and nonhumans as “barefoot equals sleeping on the same ground” (Snyder 25). Nature writers also liberally use the word “community” as it reminds us of strong bonds and collective survival. Aldo Leopold presented his “Land Ethic” by including the nonhumans as an equal part of the community. Barbara Kingsolver's writings also suggest that a harmonious balance between humans and Nature can cure our indifference toward the natural world. She effectively uses the trope of learning from nature as an important factor contributing to the spiritual growth of her characters. She also evokes the pastoral, which depicts Nature as a refuge where one gets rejuvenated to face the challenging world. Her ecological vision sees the world as interconnected relationships between equal components. She refuses to put the human at the center of the universe. She takes inspiration from the diversity and symbiosis found in nature to create the identities of her protagonists.

Imbibing lessons from the natural world to realize identity is a recurring theme in Kingsolver's novels. In her first three novels, *The Bean Trees*, *Animal Dreams*, and *Pigs in Heaven*, she envisions a community (with women in central roles) in close relationship with the land. In *The Bean Trees*, Taylor Green symbolizes the white settlers of America breaking away from their European kins. Taylor changes her name and adopts a little Cherokee girl, Turtle. This seems like a call to white settlers to form a new kinship with the land and natives. This novel depicts the importance of reciprocity and symbiosis as the core of a healthy community that is in balance with the natural world. The metaphor of car and garden runs throughout the novel. Taylor, who initially relies on the car to get away despite being terrified of exploding tyres, undergoes a transformation when she encounters Mattie, the owner of an auto repair shop in Tucson. Taylor, who has always lived in Kentucky, is dismayed when she drives into the treeless plains of Oklahoma. Finally, in Arizona, which at the beginning seemed to her “too goofy to be real” (36) and “a foreign country” (38), she settles with Turtle and

creates a home and community. Mattie plays a significant role in Taylor's transformation. Plants and gardens are also crucial in shaping Taylor's identity as a mother and a believer in universal human rights. Mattie's repair shop symbolizes her control over the machine, which is more grandly reflected in her unique garden grown in discarded auto parts. The gardens are spaces for nurturing relationships. Taylor's familiarity with the strange land also happens with the help of Mattie. Their first encounter is all about Mattie's kindness. She does not kill the bugs that have crawled out of the earth after a sudden rain, "A bug's just got one life to live, after all. Like us" (41). She also shows kindness to Taylor and Turtle and the helpless refugees. After driving a refugee couple to safety and taking their help in adopting Turtle, Taylor learns the lesson of symbiosis. The bean tree or the wisteria vine is central to Taylor's learning. The seasonal changes in the bean tree awaken Taylor to natural miracles happening in her surroundings. Reading a book on plants for Turtle, she explains the relationship between the legume and rhizobia. At this moment, Taylor the "Lone Ranger" (180) feels the futility of her previous individualism and embraces her new identity as a mother. In the beginning, she could not wait to get away from home, but in the end, she is going back to the new community she has created with Lou Ann, Mattie, and a couple of other elderly women. While driving back to Tucson, she talks to her mother and Lou Ann while Turtle sings her made-up songs. A new, well-nurtured garden of relationships is being created in the car.

The journey of Taylor and Turtle continues in Kingsolver's third novel, *Pigs in Heaven*. This novel portrays the family bonds of the Cherokee people at the center, and Taylor and her mother, Alice, create new families. The man in Taylor's house, Jax, also learns from nature and starts to see himself as a family man. The novel depicts the struggle between a Cherokee Lawyer, Annawake, who wants to take Turtle back to her people, and Taylor, who refuses to accept this. In this novel, identity is formed by being a participant in community life. The ceremonial fire is a symbol of the warmth of relationships. The warmth provided by family,

community, and nature creates a home. Annawake is depicted as a contrast to individualistic Taylor as she explains that family is not a unit of a few individuals. The Cherokee people consider the natural world a part of the family. When Annawake sees Taylor struggling to keep the birds away from her peach tree, she explains to Taylor the Cherokee way of planting trees, which involves simultaneously planting another tree for the birds. In the end, Annawake proposes joint custody of Turtle, which is shared by Taylor and Turtle's grandfather. Though this novel provides a utopian solution to the conflict, Kingsolver's incorporation of the natural world remains remarkable. Whether it is the salmon swimming upstream for procreation or the overpopulation of pigeons in the cities, Kingsolver repeatedly shows the natural world as an equal part of the human story.

Kingsolver's second novel, *Animal Dreams*, depicts Codi's coming back to her "fruit basket" (161) hometown, Grace, a picturesque town in the Southwest. Grace has two distinct features: its orchards and railways. There is a direct confrontation between a mining company and the people of Grace. The mining company has polluted the river, which is the only water source for this town, beyond repair. Codi's repaired relationship with her community flows with the land's recovery. This novel is overtly political in condemning America's foreign policy through the narration of Codi's sister, Hallie, who dies helping farmers in Nicaragua. This novel is also an indictment of America's capitalist-favoring policies. The connection with the land is a chief factor in Codi's recovery. Codi sees herself as someone who belongs to "[t]he Nothing Tribe" (220). She recognizes inspiration in nature but finds herself helpless. While watering the flowers, she thinks, "The heat seemed to wilt them right down to death's door, but water always brought them back. I could only wish for such resilience" (91).

Unwillingly, Codi takes part in the town's resistance to the mining company and starts to bond with the older women who share the stories of her childhood that she forgot. Her renewed relationship with Loyd, a Native American, reveals to her the enchanting world of

pristine Navajo land and spirituality. *Animal Dreams* declares that “awareness is everything” (324) to find the balance between nature and culture. In *Crossing Open Ground*, Barry Lopez talks about two landscapes: “one outside the self, the other within” (64). According to him, the story’s function is to draw from the order and harmony of the external landscape and project it upon the internal landscape. Codi’s internal chaos finds order when her memories return, and she begins to identify herself with the land. This happens with the help of stories told to her by the women of Grace and Loyd. With Loyd, Codi enters the Navajo land and Pueblo land. She is awe-struck by the remains of ancient native culture and the beauty of the place. Traveling through the canyons, she suddenly becomes aware of deep time, “The sand stone had been carved by ice ages and polished by desert eons of sandpaper winds” (216). She also realizes Loyd’s deep connection with the land, “On this land Loyd seemed like a family man” (221). Witnessing the family and community bonds of Loyd’s people, she begins to get out of the shell of her loneliness and trauma. Shattered by Hallie’s death, Codi again tries to escape Grace, a reminder of her pain, but comes back when her plane faces turbulence. She sees in herself the characteristics of her family and community. She is afraid of flying like her mother, loves the natural world like Hallie, is stubborn like her father, and carries the unique trait of a descendant of the seven sisters who founded Grace. This unique trait was reflected in her eyes at the time of her birth, captured in a photograph taken by her father. In the end, Codi and the land are healing together, “But now the rabbitbrush was beginning to grow here too, topped with brushy gold flowers, growing like a renegade crop in the long, straight troughs of the old irrigation ditches” (351).

Though *The Poisonwood Bible* is acknowledged as Kingsolver’s political novel, the female protagonists grow in their affinity with the natural world. The Price family’s stay in the Congo transforms Leah, Adah, and their mother, Orleanna, into women with an intimate connection with nature. Whereas Leah makes Africa home by marrying a Congolese and giving

birth to children, Adah researches viruses originating from Africa. Orleanna goes back to her love of nature, which had been subdued by her husband, Nathan. These three women reject the religion preached by Nathan and put their faith in Nature. Leah, who has suffered due to the autocratic regime in the Congo, finally settles in Angola on an old palm oil Plantation and lives with other surviving families by growing some crops and palm oil. She counts the harm done by war, "Our hardest task is teaching people to count on a future: to plant citrus trees, and compost their wastes for fertilizer" (592). Leah believes in Creation. She has faith in the cycle of seasons and the world of nature. She prays to Africa for salvation and redemption.

Adah, who has been obsessed with balance, having suffered a crooked body till her teenage, declares that earth is not for humans only. She is amazed at the balance of relationships that began in Africa and have lasted "five million years" (599). Like Leah, she also reinvents faith and believes that God is everything. Adah chooses to research viruses instead of becoming a doctor because she believes "fundamentally in the right of a plant or a virus to rule the earth" (600). Adah and Leah firmly reject the religion.

After the death of her youngest daughter, Orleanna leaves her fanatic husband and goes back to America. By freeing herself from Nathan, she regresses to her past self when she had an ardent love for nature. Nature helps in her healing as she deals with grief and guilt of not protecting her daughters from Nathan, "If there was still some part of a beautiful heathen girl in me, a girl drawn to admiration like a moth to moonlight, and if her heart still pounded on Georgia nights when the peeper frogs called out from roadside ditches, she was too dumbfounded to speak up for herself" (228). She yearns for forgiveness and retreats into silence but does not become a recluse. She starts fighting for human rights. Adah is surprised at her mother's transformation, "Now Mother's sack is the mere peak of a roof surrounded by a blaze of pinks, blues, oranges. . . . It turns out Mother has an extraordinary talent for flowers. She was an entire botanical garden waiting to happen" (464). In the end, Orleanna unsuccessfully

tries to find the grave of her dead daughter by going back to Africa. The daughter's spirit, having become one with Nature, implores the mother to learn “forgive” in the other way, i.e., “give for” (614).

The Lacuna, another political novel of Kingsolver, also gives redemption and escape to its protagonist through Nature. The story mixes fact and fiction and indirectly narrates the story of Harrison William Shepherd around World War II. Harrison’s most important lessons of life come from the wonders of nature. On the Isla Pixol, as a fourteen-year-old, he learns to hold his breath underwater. He marvels, “Underneath the ocean is a world without people. The sea-roof rocks overhead as you drift among the purple trees of coral forest, surrounded by a heavenly body of light made of shining fishes” (6). The lacuna in the ocean takes him to another part of the mainland. The memory of transversing one world of suffering to another of freedom stays with him. This lacuna shapes his worldview. Whenever he reaches a dead-end, he remembers another side full of hope. Unable to evade political persecution in the USA, he escapes through this lacuna and disappears. People think he has drowned, but he transforms into another person and rejects the American part of his existence.

Prodigal Summer and *Flight Behaviour* are ecological novels. *Flight Behaviour* takes on the theme of climate change that novelists find difficult to narrate within the conventional forms of narration. Amitav Ghosh has explained this dilemma in *The Great Derangement*. *Prodigal Summer*, bathed in all the natural beauty of Appalachia in summer, shows the growth of three protagonists: Deanna, Lusa, and elderly Garnett Walker. The two women enter a renewed relationship with nature, which they have always loved. Garnett enters a renewed relationship with the land he has inhabited since birth. These three prodigal children return to a healthy relationship with the land. Their lessons come from nature. Garnett, a devout Christian and a lover of pesticides, transforms with the push from Nannie Rawley, who is like a mother to Deanna. For Garnett, Nannie and her organic methods are an annoyance. He thinks

of himself as the extinct American chestnut and calls his ancestors "chestnut people" (131). He works to revive the lost species of American chestnuts and dreams of restoring the "landscape of his father's manhood" (132). Nannie's exchanges with Garnett are lessons in ecology and humility:

To our dominion over the earth, Mr. Walker, we owe our thanks for the chestnut blight.

Our thanks for kudzu, honeysuckle, and the Japanese beetle also. I think that's all God's little joke on us for getting too big for our britches. We love to declare that god made us in his image, but even so, he's three billion years old and we're just babies. (218-19)

Garnett realizes his unique relationship with the land when he recognizes his remarkable ability to look at the trees. Looking at a fully grown pokeweed that survived pesticide, he wonders at its ability to grow fast. His amazement is generated by a sudden realization, "A man could live under these things every day and forget to notice their magnitude" (369). Despite his weak eyesight, Garnett can recognize by instinct the charms of individual trees from the leaves. Finally, Nannie helps mend his relationship with the land by pointing out the two American Chestnut plants growing in her woods, which are crucial for his project and which he never observed before because, as a good neighbor, he never crossed over to Nannie's woods. Lusa also helps in repairing his relationship with his estranged grandchildren.

Entomologist Lusa, an outsider to this land, has a very romantic notion of Nature. After the tragic death of her husband, the care of the farm falls on her. As she starts to understand the struggle of farming without waging war on Nature, she also begins to take care of two children of her ailing sister-in-law. Her mending relationship with her husband's family, especially the children, her diverse ethnic background, and her scientific knowledge turn her into a successful farmer. She understands that human ingenuity is essential in surviving in the face of raw nature. In the beginning, Lusa is full of doubts about her choice to settle in a small

town, but in the end, she transforms into a “landholder” (416). Lusa also nurtures the children into a deep appreciation for nature. Her last scene in the novel shows her having “awakened today with a deep desire to put the place in order” (442). This scene reflects the change from someone who once despised rural people for curtailing weeds to someone who understands the need to do so. However, Lusa does not choose destructive methods. When she sees her previous favorite honeysuckle covering her garage she sees the truth of this plant, “It was only honeysuckle, an invasive exotic, nothing sacred” (443). She understands that this plant will harm the place that she considers her shared home with all other living beings.

Deanna, a local, has come back after her failed marriage and spends her time on the mountain as a forest ranger. She has a Ph.D. on the behavior of coyotes. She has been away from sustained human company for almost two years. This summer, she is following the movements of a coyote family, watching them fill the place of predators in this ecosystem. This place was left vacant after the red wolves were hunted to extinction. Deanna’s musings in the woods echo the loss of extinct species that once inhabited these woods. She considers the extinct creatures as her dead relatives and grieves for them. Kingsolver sharply criticizes the white settlers for indiscriminately killing the wild animals of the region.

Though Deanna has declared to Nannie that she “lived with wood thrushes for company” (54), she is troubled by the confusion about her place: “A bird never doubts its place at the center of the universe” (55). In this state of mind, she meets Eddie Bondo, a young hunter. Following animal instinct, she has an affair with him but knows that his stay is temporary. Deanna begins to experience change when she becomes pregnant. The internal change is also reflected on the land:

On the trail up to this overlook today she had paid little mind to the sadness of lost things moving through the leaves at the edges of her vision, the shadowy little wolves and bright-winged parakeets hopping wistfully through untouched cockleburs. These

dispossessed creatures were beside her and always would be, but just for today she noticed instead a single bright red berry among all the clusters of green ones covering the spicebushes. This sign seemed meaningful and wondrous, standing as a divide between one epoch of her life and the next. (388-89)

In her last scene, facing the terrible storm alone in her cabin, she measures the strength of community reflected in the building of the oak cabin that shelters her. She understands “solitude was the faultiest of human presumptions” (437). The last and untitled chapter is narrated from the female coyote's point of view. Life is measured by the will to survive.

Dellarobia, the protagonist of *Flight Behaviour*, realizes the connections between local and planetary, personal and universal when the hordes of monarch butterflies come to settle in her family's woods. The monarchs play a crucial role in awakening Dellarobia to the natural world. They are also crucial in re-forming her identity from a bored housewife to a student of science. The narrative is shadowed by the strange weather and the strange phenomenon of the arrival of the monarchs. On the one hand, Kingsolver describes the amazing beauty of the butterflies, and on the other hand, the eerie approaching extinction of the butterflies. The science team, especially Dr Ovid Byron, brings the talk of climate change within the house of Dellarobia. She considers the butterflies God's gift for her and is amazed:

Air filled with quivering butterfly light. The space between trees glittered, more real and alive than the trees themselves. The scaly forest still bore the same bulbous burden in its branches she'd seen before, even more of it, if possible. The drooping branches seemed bent to the breaking point under their weight. Of butterflies. The verity of that took her breath. (53)

However, she gets disappointed when she learns that the butterflies here are symptoms of something wrong in nature, “Some deep and terrible trouble had sent the monarchs to the wrong address . . . The butterflies had no choice but to trust in their world of signs, the sun's angle set

against a turn of the seasons, and something inside all that had betrayed them” (245). Dr. Byron occasionally voices his dismay at the human attitude of apathy toward nature.

As Dellarobia participates in the attempts to save the butterflies, she becomes more awakened to her life and surroundings. She sees the futility of her marriage. Though her relationship with her mother-in-law improves, she decides to divorce and move to the city with her kids. She plans to pursue higher studies and become independent. Dellarobia’s planned departure coincides with the departure of the butterflies. Hit by an unseasonal snowstorm, the butterflies are considered lost. But when the melted snow brings a terrible flood and Dellarobia, who is alone at home, tries to escape her drowning house, the butterflies fly away in defiance of death. The monarchs give her a new parable. Dellarobia and the monarchs are left to make a new beginning in this new world “where you could count on nothing you’d ever known or trusted” (325). The novel ends on a chilling note, filling the readers with the fear of the unknown.

Though climate change remains a thematic concern in *Unsheltered*, Kingsolver could not repeat the magic of the protagonists learning from nature. The characters remain stagnant. Willa Knox only contemplates the failures of the economic policies of past decades and slims down her household. Tig appears to have been born the way she is, waiting for the old-world order to die so a responsible new generation can take over. Willa occasionally sees hope:

This peninsula was the jumping-off point for most of the migratory birds from New England to upper Canada, millions of them, all headed south. Every year, but especially in this one with its two big storms, birds congregated en masse while they waited for good weather and the gumption to launch themselves out. Willa was amazed. She’d never given a thought to these little lives hurtling themselves over the 136 dark ocean, their tiny brains still big enough to dream of a warm jungle on the far side of a god-awful journey. (168)

Kingsolver presents the past, when Darwin appeared, to show that humans can adapt to changes. Willa comes upon the story of the botanist Mary Treat, who worked with Darwin and Asa Gray. Mary's character is presented to inspire readers to evolve scientific thinking. Kingsolver's depiction of the natural world, as always, remains mesmerizing. At one point, Willa displays hope and frustration, "A great shift was dawning, with the human masters' place in the kingdom much reduced from its former glory. She could see how this might lead to a sense of complete disorientation in the universe. But still. The old paradigm was an obsolete shell; the writing on the wall was huge. They just wouldn't read" (391). Those times are compared with the present age in the hope that humans may finally understand that their survival is at stake.

Kingsolver's writings persuade people to change their perception of the natural world. This reinvention of oneself as one component of the whole, interconnected with everything else, can propel us to take great care of the earth. Her novels present ordinary people who develop a deep connection with their surrounding world and re-form their identities as Earth citizens. They achieve self-realization only by losing themselves in Nature.

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