

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* from an Ecocritical perspective

Research ward and Author: **E. Rajalakshmi**,
Bishop Heber College,
Trichy-17
&

Research Supervisor and Co- author: **Dr. K. Shanthi**,
Assistant Professor,
Bishop Heber College, Trichy-17

Abstract

Barbara Kingsolver is a celebrated and popular American novelist. She is an award winning writer whose works have been published in more than sixty five countries around the world. She has also written short stories, poems and non fictions. Kingsolver is widely recognized for crafting strong, working class female protagonists concerned with social and political issues such as poverty, environmental causes, and human rights violations. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, Ecocriticism is the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment. The Bean Trees unfolds the problems faced by Taylor Greer as a single mother and how she manages to solve it. It is a relationship based novel with nature as an underlying theme. This research paper aims to analyze the novel, The Bean Trees from ecocritical perspective.

Keywords: Nature as inspiration, Landscape, Place and Psychology, Land and Biodiversity

Barbara Kingsolver was born in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1955 and grew up in the rural and impoverished town of Carlisle, Kentucky. Kingsolver earned her M.S. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from the University of Arizona in 1981. While pregnant with her first child, Kingsolver began her work on *The Bean Trees*, which won a 1988 American Library Association Award. Barbara Kingsolver herself a Kentuckian living in Arizona has portrayed the landscapes effortlessly in the novel *The Bean Trees*.

The Bean Trees is unlike other Kingsolver's fictions. It is an undramatic story told and lived by common people, most of them women. The story is anthropocentric and revolves around single motherhood, love and friendship. In the first instance, it is about the mother's fierce love for her daughter, even if she isn't legally the mother. In the second instance, Invasion as metaphor is used in the story. Invasion as it is experienced by middle America, the unemployed and underemployed. It is an intriguing blend of southern and western elements. The novel covers expansive territory literally and figuratively. According to postmodern Ecocritics, "self and geography are bound together in a narrative which locates us in moral space of defining

relations” (Cheney 31). When analyzed from ecocritical perspective, the following study has been made.

The novel starts with the first person narrative where the narrator shares her childhood memories. Alternating chapters have third person narrative in which the story of Lou Ann is narrated. From chapter six, two lines of narrative eventually converge where Taylor and Lou Ann meet each other and start living together. Along with the main plot, the story also has many microstories which include characters like Mattie (owner of tire store), Sandi (Taylor’s friend), Estevan and Esperanza (Guatemalan refugees), Edna and Virgie (two older neighbor women).

Miss Marietta, the only daughter of Alice Jean and Foster Greer lives with her mother in Pittman county, Kentucky, after her father abandons the family. The poor girl with the goal to explore the world and to avoid pregnancy leaves her home in search of more fulfilling life. She changes her name as Taylor Greer. While driving west across the United States, she becomes responsible for an abandoned Cherokee child at Oklahoma. She named her as Turtle. Both continue their journey and decide to settle in Tucson, Arizona, where they share the home of Lou Ann Ruiz. She is also from Kentucky but already a sometime Tucson resident. Her husband loses his sense of self after an accident and abandoned her when she was pregnant. Taylor befriends Mattie, a widow who runs a store named ‘Jesus Is Lord Used Tires’; gives her a job. She meets the refugees from sanctuary movement Estevan and Esperanza, who help her in the end to adopt Turtle as her daughter by posing as false parents. Edna and Virgie are two older neighbor women who help Taylor and Ann in babysitting their babies.

Kentucky is known for horse racing, bourbon distilleries, moonshine, coal, automobile manufacturing, tobacco and Bluegrass. The popularity of Kentuckian horse racing can be understood from Sandi’s conversation with Taylor. Sandi thinks that everybody in Kentucky owns a horse. She tells Taylor, “My absolute *dream* is to have a horse of my own, and braid flowers in its mane and prance around in a ring and win ribbons and stuff” (67). The specialty of the place can be understood from these lines, where nature is dominant than artificiality. Nature can create more impact in human lives than man made things.

In ecocritical studies, based on cultural perspective nature is classified into four main areas. Kingsolver has included all the areas in the story. Taylor’s travel towards west can be seen from ecocritical point of view. She travels from Kentucky to Arizona. According to Dreese, “remapping the terrains, whether in a metaphysical or geographic sense, is always to some degree psychological”(47). “The deterritorializations and the psychic reterritorializations are present in the form of landscapes or places used literally and metaphorically to represent sites of conflict or refuge where the writers criticize and reconstruct borders and zones of human and ideological contact” (Dreese 48).

While travelling towards Arizona Taylor takes a break in Oklahoma. The landscape in Oklahoma is juxtaposed with the landscape in Kentucky. Both Kentucky and Oklahoma can be categorized under area two and three. Area two, the ‘scenic sublime’ includes areas like forests,

lakes, mountains, cliffs and waterfalls. And area three, the 'outside countryside' includes areas like hills, fields and woods.

Kentucky is a fertile land with rich biodiversity. Taylor describes "In Kentucky you could never see too far, since there were always mountains blocking the other side of your view, and it left you the chance to think something good might be just over the next hill" (17). She also tells what she notices in Oklahoma. She says, "There was central Oklahoma. I had never imagined that any part of a round earth could be so flat" (17). Taylor compares the landscapes based on her emotions and psyche. Taylor says, "But out there on the plain it was all laid out right in front of you, and no matter how far you looked it didn't get any better. Oklahoma made me feel there was nothing left to hope for" (17). The environmental description given by Taylor in the story is more psychological. It's not that Oklahoma doesn't have trees but she says, ". . . there was not one tree in the entire state of Oklahoma" (18). To understand one's self one should understand what one's self is not. So, along with the exploration of one's inner self one should also explore the outer world. Taylor wants to leave home in order to gain a more fulfilling life. This shows her inner self. Traveling stands for exploring the outer self which includes nature. This proves Cheney's argument that "psychology without ecology is lonely and vice versa" (31). The deterritorialization from her home land makes her say, "My eyes had started to hurt in Oklahoma from all that flat land (49)." The conflict in Taylor's mind is expressed through description of landscape in the story. So every man is innately connected to the external world and the landscapes influence man.

The same can be noticed while she describes Arizona. "The clouds were pink and fat and hilarious-looking, like the hippo ballerina in a Disney movie" (47). Arizona can be categorized under area one, 'the wilderness' which includes areas like deserts, oceans and uninhabited continents. Taylor while driving towards Arizona says, "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. Rocks stacked on top of one another like piles of copulating potato bugs. Whenever the sun hit them, they turned pink. The whole scene looked too goofy to be real" (47).

Taylor decides to settle in Arizona. Half of the novel has Arizona as its setting. The narrator brings to light certain environmental and ecological facts of Arizona along with the story. Arizona has few rare species which are limited only to that place which includes tarantula and black bugs with horns. A man in Arizona tells her about tarantula "there was this hairy spider about the size of a small farm animal making its way across the pavement" (51). It is venomous insect. The man says, "they can jump four feet. If they get you, you go crazy. It's a special kind of poison" (51). There is also a reference to a mystical and rare flower which grows in Arizona named Cereus. A night blooming cereus, Virgie Mae explained. The flowers open for only one night of the year, and then they are gone" (248).

Culturally, certain landscapes are assumed useless and unappreciated by people. One such example from the novel is where Taylor expects Arizona to be an endless sea of sand dunes

but is different from other deserts. She says, “There were bushes and trees and weeds here, exactly the same as anywhere else, except that colors were different, and everything alive had thorns” (216). Based on their appearance, certain living organisms in nature are considered evil. For example Taylor on seeing the trees and plants in the desert describes it as “The saguaros were the great big spiny ones, as tall as normal trees but so skinny and person like that, . . . these looked to me like candles from hell” (217).

Mattie’s garden can be categorized under area four, ‘the domestic picturesque’ which includes areas like parks, gardens and lanes. In the backyard of Mattie’s tire store, she has a garden where she grows few vegetables and flowers for her use. “Outside was a bright, wild wonderland of flowers and vegetables and auto parts . . . CB antennas was all over-grown with Cherry-tomato vines” (61- 62).

Kingsolver makes her readers aware of how animals are drugged and exploited in reality. By enslaving animals men show their power. It is considered as sport and entertainment. One such example is Angel (Lou’s husband) took a picture sitting on the bull. The bull named S.O.B. is considered to be the meanest bull in the history of rodeo. “. . . the animal was doped up on PCP, which the rodeys used to drug the bulls and horses when they move them around. PCP was common as dirt in that line of work” (44).

The Bean Trees also gives information about the plight of American Indians. Invasions and conquests had its serious consequences and repercussions on the ecological lives of the native populace. Due to invasion of American Indian lands, they were forced to leave their native lands. This dislocation or loss of habitat led to basic ecological cataclysm in jeopardizing the lives of the natives further leading to unemployment and underemployment of native people. Cherokees are one of the indigenous people of the southeastern woodlands. Cherokee people are nature conscious people. They view nature from animistic perspective. One such example is “The Cherokees believed God was in trees” (18). Their lifestyle is nature oriented and when expelled from their land they faced too many tribulations. It even affected their family tree. One such example from the novel is the life of Turtle who is a Cherokee girl. The expulsion of people from their native land created a chaos in the family and affected Turtle’s life.

The Guatemalan refugees are also the victims of invasion of land by Americans. The struggles faced by people in Sanctuary movement are brought to notice through Guatemalan refugees Estevan and Esperanza in the novel. The narrator brilliantly portrays the condition of the refugees by using nature as a symbol. Estevan tells Taylor “the national symbol of the Indian people in Guatemala was a quetzal, a beautiful green bird with a long, long tail” (257). Quetzal is an ecological symbol. There is reason for referring to the symbol. The specialty about the bird is “if you tried to keep this bird in a cage, it died” (257). As for the bird, every man has a right to live in the world, if they are enslaved they will suffer and die which in turn clearly depicts the plight of native Americans under the government rule.

The title of the novel has ecocritical significance. The first words uttered by two year old horticulturally minded Turtle are the “Bean trees”. Turtle pointed at the wisteria vines and called it “Bean trees”. “Some of the wisteria flowers had gone to seed, and all these wonderful long pods hung down from the branches” (194). The story line has a connection to the wisteria vines. “It is a climbing ornamental vine found in temperate latitudes, and came originally from the Orient. It blooms in the early spring, is pollinated by bees, and forms beanlike pods” (305). Taylor reads out to Turtle, the life cycle of wisteria which belongs to a bean family. Everything related to bean is called a legume.

There is a specialty to this wisteria vines. It has some helping bacteria called rhizobia in its roots. Taylor compares the natural phenomena in nature with her life. Taylor says “The rhizobia are not actually part of the plant, they are separate creatures, but they always live with legumes: a kind of underground railroad moving secretly up and down the roots” (305). The wisteria survive because of the rhizobia in its roots. It helps in turning nitrogen gas into fertilizer, allowing the vines to thrive in poor soil and ultimately to metamorphose into long green pod- the “bean trees.” Taylor says “There’s a whole invisible system for helping out the plant that you’d never guess was there” (305).

When compared to human life - a person needs a support system to flourish in life. Taylor says, “The wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by, is how I explained it to Turtle, but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles” (305). Taylor has a good support system around her where Mattie, Lou Ann, Esperanza, Esteven, Edna and Virgie have good will towards Taylor and works for her welfare. The human chain of characters in the novel around the protagonist Taylor operates in the same way as rhizobia function with wisteria vines.

The theme of the novel derives its inspiration from nature. The main plot of the story is designed based on the phenomena. The concept resembles the first law of ecology which in Commoner’s phrase, “Everything is connected to everything else” (Ruekert 108). When analyzed from ecological perspective, the depiction of nature is subtle but plays a huge significance in the plot. The title of the novel proves the ecocentric undercurrent in the plot even though the story mainly focuses on the life of Taylor and Turtle.

Kingsolver is praised for her strong humour, vivid characterization, absorbing plots and ability to combine colourful dialogue reminiscent of Kentucky and Arizona with evocative imagery of the southwest along with ecological consciousness.

Works cited:

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2013. Print.

Cheney, Jim. *Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative*. Albany: University of New York Press, 1955. Print.

Dreese, N Donelle. *Ecocriticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2002. Print.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Bean Trees*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988. Print.