

Elucidating Gyn/Ecology in the Novel *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to prove that women and nature are mutually integrated with our ecosystem while they face oppression at the hands of materialistic greed and hegemony. Expanding this hypothesis, the paper discusses women's oppression by a patriarchal society and how the patriarchal society exploits nature as depicted in the novel *The Bean Tree* (1988). The novel *The Bean Tree* (1988) by Barbara Kingsolver is set in the southern part of America and revolves around Plucky Tylor Greer, a young woman who is running away from her difficult past and becomes a guardian of a child by accident. As she comes to terms with her situation, the readers could witness the destruction of nature and women in the narration. In the elucidation of the concept Gyn/Ecology, the researcher also examines the sub-themes of domestic violence, child abuse, geopolitics, etc. Employing the theoretical conception of Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology, the researcher also calls attention to the prioritization of Gyn/Ecology in sustaining nature.

Keywords: Gyn/ Ecology, Environmental degradation and Ecofeminism

1. Introduction

Barbara Kingsolver is a predominant writer in American literature. She is a novelist, poet and essayist. She has made incredible contributions in the fields of literature, ecofeminism and Gyn/Ecology and has been conferred with national and international accolades and awards such as the National Humanities Medal by the hands of Bill Clinton (U.S. President), the PEN/Falkner Award, the Eco-Fiction Award and the Pulitzer Prize, to name a few. Her bestseller novel, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), won the National Book Prize of South Africa. As a biologist, feminist activist and environmentalist, Barbara had an intense love for nature and hence her works encompass some of the most pressing concerns of the environment, ecology and its ramifications with ecofeminism and Gyn/Ecology. The increasing prominence of ecocriticism as an emerging interdisciplinary framework in cultural and literary discourse has been steadily gaining momentum of late. Ecocriticism, in its broadest sense, is the humanities' reaction to the ecological issue that modernity has created as a result of its unrestrained socioeconomic and industrial imperialism. Hence, the examination of its ramifications on socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic background, gender identity and ecology has emerged as key concepts in the field of cultural studies (Zapf, 2016). In this context, the primary aim of the current research paper is to examine the interrelationship and symbiotic communion that intrinsically exist between nature, women and the ecosystem. The secondary objective is to depict Gyn/Ecological aspects reflected in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Tree* (1988).

The researcher has used the novel *The Bean Tree* (1988) by Barbara Kingsolver as the primary text and numerous research articles, books, internet data and e-resources collected from university libraries as the secondary resources for the analysis of the construct employing qualitative and descriptive approach.

2. Conceptual Overview of Ecofeminism and Gyn/Ecology

Before examining the concept of Gyn/Ecology, one must know the basis of ecofeminism. The concept of ecofeminism comes under the theory of feminism and ecology, which is a study of the relationship between females and nature. The term ecofeminism was conceived by Françoise d'Eaubonne, a French feminist back in 1974. Certainly, critics called this term 'Ecological Feminism'. Theorists like Ana Isla, Mary Mellor, Ariel Salleh, Vandana Shiva, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Maria Mies and Karen J. Warren has been strong ecofeminists for years and contributed a great deal to the theory. According to Karen J. Warren, "Ecofeminism calls attention to the rift between the self and the environment, as well as the connection between the domination of the environment and the domination of women" (Warren & (Ed.), 1997). Talking about the ecological crisis that the world is currently confronted with, Gretchen T. Legler states as

Ecofeminism argue that dealing with practical environment problems (where to place nuclear waste dumps, where to build garbage incinerators, how to design water system in Latin American Villages) is both an eco-logical and a feminist task because the uses and abuses of the environment that have led to what they see as the potentially catastrophic present as largely due to a patriarchal environmental ethic that has conceptualized land as “Women”. (Legler, 2019)

Taking these two conceptual perspectives, the two theorists postulate that women and land are indistinguishable, the patriarchal society obliterates nature is equivalent to exploiting women’s life.

Moreover, Ecofeminism primarily renounces the patriarchal perspective where man is considered the epi-center and has complete dominion over every creation. This fallacious claim for the indubitable authority of patriarchy would have led to the domination of women and nature in this world. In addition, people considered the earth as a sacred woman and they called it ‘mother nature’ down through the ages. This analogous comparison remains intact and in the concept of ecofeminism and Gyn/Ecology. However, the patriarchal ideology could destroy the sacredness of women and nature and might make them a victim of materialistic greed. Gyn/Ecology questions these radically unjust treatments of patriarchy. The following views of Dobscha hold true in this regard, “The primary belief of ecofeminism is that the domination of women (as studied in traditional feminism) parallels the domination of nature and that this mutual domination has led to environmental destruction by the controlling patriarchal society” (Dobscha, 1993).

Gyn/Ecology, on the other hand, is an emerging, underexplored theoretical concept that is deeply integrated with ecocriticism. Mary Daly conceptualized and coined the term ‘Gyn/Ecology’ in her book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1990).

According to Daly “The writing of Gyn/Ecology was for me an act of Biophilic Bonding with women of all races and classes, under all varying oppressions of patriarchy” (Daly, 1990). Through this radical feminist work, she tries to be the voice for those whose voices were unheard across generations. In her book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), she talks about the patriarchal oppression of women down the centuries under the pretext of upholding religious dogmas and mores. Besides, Mary Daly describes this book as “The Course be called an “anti-male” book” (Daly, 1990) where she highlights the term ‘anti-male’ through the explanation of patriarchal society’s subjugation of women by atrocious cultural practices, considering many examples of many extreme cases such as the Chinese foot binding of girl children and burning of women during the Renaissance age, accusing them of witches.

Some of Daly’s novels that resonate with the concept of ecofeminism and Gyn/Ecology are *The Bean Trees* (1988), *Animals Dreams* (1990), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), *Prodigal Summer* (2000) and *Flight Behavior* (2012). However, the researcher has chosen *The Bean Tree* (1988) as this literary masterpiece is rich and reverberates with the concept of Gyn/Ecology that remains latent and unexplored.

3. Elucidation and discussion of Gyn/Ecology in *The Bean Trees* (1988)

3.1 Background and Plot to *The Bean Trees* (1988)

Barbara Kingsolver is one of the most remarkable environmental enthusiasts. Most of Kingsolver’s works are read for her environmental concern and female emancipation. Kingsolver in and through her works, educates her readers about the value of nature in the contemporary world of environmental crises. In all of her 13 novels published since 1988, she vociferously advocates how humans fit into the ecosystem and their responsibility to preserve and conserve the natural resources of Mother Earth. The novel *The Bean Trees* (1988) remains very close to her heart as it is her maiden novel, written when she was pregnant.

The novel *The Bean Tree* (1988) has been frequently read in terms of eco-centric and anthropocentric views, the bond of nature in human beings’ perspective was analyzed as a thriving relationship between human beings connected to nature, especially the connection between women and nature. Therefore, to highlight this kind of connection the researchers have used the concept like ecofeminism. Consequently, Researchers shed light on the togetherness of the environment and women in this destructive world. And environmental-based talks also have been given importance in the novel *The Bean Trees* (1988), to emphasize this talk the researcher has underscored the theory of ecocriticism which has numerous sub-branches. Most of these sub-branches are probed in this novel which shows the readers that the environment plays a significant role in human life.

The novel *The Bean Trees* (1988) talks about human experiences with nature, especially female bodies. The entire story is packed with strong female characters and their experiences in the patriarchal society. “Barbara shattered the stereotypical image of women and addresses her with strength, wisdom and rebellious spirit of exploring themselves” (Alazzawi, 2019). All the main women characters in the novel are affected by patriarchy in different ways. Starting from the protagonist’s mother to a three-year-old child, the patriarchal men were cruel and brutish in one way or another. “Patriarchy is also the prevailing religion of the entire planet, and its essential message is necrophilia.” (Daly, 1990). As Mary Daly, mentioned in her book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1990), substantiates that a Patriarchal society is like a cult where no female can escape from that and it is not innocuous to the world. Likewise, the characters in the novel were affected by this paternalistic cult in a vicious way.

3.2 Domestic Acts of Violence

Domestic acts of violence are also evident in this novel. World Health Organization defined domestic violence as “the rage of sexually, psychologically and physically coercive acts used against adult and adolescent women by current or former male intimate partners” (World Health Organization, 1997) (Koenig, et al., 2003). Instances of domestic violence abound in this novel. A close reading of the novel’s text clearly reinstates the fact that Domestic outbreaks of violence have been recorded in this novel from chapter one where

Taylor admits that her mother went through a lot of wild times with her husband Forster Greer. Moreover, writers of the view that feminists could view these kinds of abuse in a different light from medical and psychological ways “Feminist perspective has traditionally viewed relationship violence as an expression of patriarchal oppression against women that is socially sanctioned” (Lammers, Ritchie, & Robertson, 2005). In addition, Domestic Violence psychologically affects its victim in so many ways. It would make them think that they are not valuable and they have no power in their life which is one of the reasons for many female characters in the novel including the protagonist embarking on a journey in search of freedom.

In *The Bean Trees* (1988), the protagonist changes her name from Marietta to Taylor. She reaffirms her identity through her name Taylor. Changing her name is symbolic of Taylor finally taking control of her life and making her in charge. Taylor always wants to be independent, so she gets a car with her earnings as a lab assistant. She leaves her town to be independent and to create her own world where she wants to meet with her own destiny and an unexpected state of affairs.

Likewise, the flat character Lou Ann who is a Kentuckian but settled in Tucson has also been a victim of domestic violence done through verbal abuse. Lou Ann is a very sensitive woman who is always worried about her baby Dwayne Ray. Her husband, Angel walked out on their marital relationship when their relationship doesn't make sense to him. In the second chapter, Angel abuses Lou Ann through verbalization, “He listed names of people, mostly friends of his, she could barely remember having met and asked her if she had slept with them, or if she had wanted to” (Kingsolver, 1988). It is an act of ‘Psychological Aggression’, this term defined as “a communication, either verbal or non-verbal, intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or perceived as having that intent” (Straus & Sweet, 1992). This kind of verbal abuse act also called ‘Emotional Abuse’ that can be defined as “Emotional abuse can include verbal assault, dominance, control, isolation, ridicule, or the use of intimate knowledge for degradation” (Follingstad, Coyne, & Gambone, 2005).

Lou Ann's world revolves around Angel. Lou doesn't know anything other than Angel but he was very rude to her by all means. Despite her pregnancy, he hurt her every day with his abusive words. But in return, she gave him unconditional love, she took care of him when he loses his leg in a truck accident. Women are expected and trained to be the providers of unconditional love irrespective of their situation. If they fail to provide unconditional love and chose to act on logic or question their unjust position, then they are condemned by the patriarchal system. They are often expected to live in relation with their men in life like father, son or husband and they are never appreciated for their individuality. Similarly, nature is also expected to provide unconditional nourishment to its master irrespective of the abuse and exploitation it faces. But in reality, nature doesn't hold, it explodes. Similarly, Mary Daly in her book says that rage is good for women against male dominant society. The following postulates of Daly bear wittedness to this standpoint.

Gyn/Ecology can be Seen/Heard as a Thunderbolt of Rage that I hurled into the world against the patriarchs who have never ceased to massacre women and our sister Earth. I wrote it in a Time of Great Rage, when women were Wildly Moving, inspired by their Creative Fury.

Rage is not a stage. It is a transformative focusing Force that awakens transcendent E-motion. It is my broom, my Fire-breathing, winged mare. It is my spiraling staircase, leading me where I can find my own Kind, unbind my mind (Daly, 1990).

After Angel divorced Lou Ann, she became independent like Taylor. As Lou Ann's husband left her with a child which subsequently made her more responsible. The researcher would say that Lou Ann got her independence when she was bold enough to go to work and took care of herself and her baby Dwayne Ray.

Many a time, situations like divorce, child abuse and domestic violence play a significant role in the life journey of the protagonist, Taylor from innocent childhood to a drastically changed woman. Women, under such unpalatable circumstances, have no other option but to resort to matriarchal survival for self-identity. Finding one's identity as a woman in a patriarchal society would be challenging. Lou Ann and Taylor try to re-create their identity despite facing hard circumstances. Daly gave a clear explanation for the term ‘Patriarchy’, “Patriarchy is the homeland of males: it is the Father Land and men are its agents” (Daly, 1990). By giving the explanation for patriarchy Daly confirms the status of women living in a patriarchal society where they cannot expect equality for themselves and are exploited by the other sex.

Thus, the protagonist of the novel, Taylor extends the notion of re-creating one's identity to her adoptive child by renaming her as Turtle. In the story, Turtle's life the delineating effects of child abuse in one's life. “Children abuse-which occurs often in Domestic Violence-result in emotional trauma as well as psychological consequences that can negatively impact the learning opportunities” (Rolle, Ramon, & Brustia, 2019). When an anonymous lady drops the baby in Taylor's car, she took up the child's responsibility from that day onwards.

When I pulled off the pants and the diapers there were more bruises.

Bruises and worse.

The Indian child was a girl. A girl, poor thing. That fact had already burdened her short life with a kind of misery I could not imagine. I thought I knew about every ugly thing that one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl (Kingsolver, 1988).

Here the readers can witness the brutal abuse of the child which moves the readers' hearts, even Taylor can't imagine the difficult scenario that the child has faced. Taylor named the child ‘Turtle’ and tries to give her new life and that new journey is the crux of this novel. Consequently, the abuse and unbridled violence had made the child physically defective, she looks like a 24-month baby in spite

of being a 3-year-old dumb kid. This was identified by the doctor when Turtle was taken for a medical checkup. And Dr. Pelinowsky explains Turtle's condition to Taylor thus "Sometimes in an environment of physical or emotional deprivation a child will simply stop growing, although certain internal maturation does continue. It's a condition we call failure to thrive" (Kingsolver, 1988).

Furthermore, the patriarchal society brings this condition to Turtle through brutal abuse. But for the second time after the check-up, the doctor found out that she is not physically molested. A long time after the first abuse Taylor tries to make her talk, but after the second shock she totally stops talking, consequently, it took time to recover her speaking quality. Cynthia a social worker came to treat Turtle, she releases the shocking news which shakes not only Taylor but also the readers. "She told me that maybe one out of every four little girls is sexually abused by a family member. Maybe more" (Kingsolver, 1988). Barbara Kingsolver gave information about child abuse which is still prevailing in this world. These events in the novel show the threat to the existence of female bodies in the world. And this child abuse of Turtle confirms that women are the object of males. If people didn't take any effort to take this kind of issue seriously then it will become a threat to the whole human species. To take this kind of issue seriously Mary Daly conceives the term Gyn/Ecology.

3.3 *Communion of Women and Nature in the Gyn/Ecology Perspective*

Barbara Kingsolver is one of the very few writers who emphasizes a great deal on the intrinsic relationship that both world of nature and human beings. She subtly underscores the common bond and communion that both the realm of dynamisms shares. Thus, her works constantly talk about the relationship between nature and human beings and most of her novels have environmental-based themes. She has a strong base in biology which also infuses newer perspectives of environmental concerns into her literary works. "Kingsolver frequently draws on biology to create parallels between the interconnections of the natural world and human society" (Menaka & Mathews, 2018). The ensuing comments of Himmelwright underscore this stance.

Although Kingsolver focuses on the relationship in terms that reflect the human world, she describes these relationships in terms that reflect the natural world. By doing so, Kingsolver compares the connections between people with the relationship essential in the plant and animal world, as seen in Taylor's description of Turtle's holding on...Where between people and plants or between soil and animals, productivity only occurs through relationship (Himmelwright, 2007).

Barbara Kingsolver kept a powerful bond between women and nature is evidently brought out in the 15th chapter, where Taylor talks about the mysterious inner minds of women and aptly compares them with natural elements such as in the case of Esperanza. Thus, through the comparison of women with nature, she poignantly unveils their sufferings.

Something was going on inside of Esperanza. Something was thawing. Once I saw a TV program about how spring come to Alaska. They made a big deal about the river starting to run again, shoeing huge chunk of ice rumbling and shivering and bashing against each other and breaking up. This is how it was with Esperanza. Behind her eyes, or deeper, in the arteries around her heart, something was starting to move (Kingsolver, 1988).

Here Taylor compares Esperanza's mysterious thinking with the river when something was going around her eyes. Through these elements, the oneness of nature with women is constantly repeated and re-established in the narration.

Furthermore, Nature faces a threat of existence like females in this destructive world. Similarly, nature problems are addressed in the novel and compared with women. After an attempt of suicide Taylor describes Esperanza. "Her eyes flew up at me like pair of blackbirds scared out of safe hiding" (Kingsolver, 1988). Behind Esperanza's eyes, there is the story of blood, murder, refugee struggles and other blood-curdling stories that move the reader and she desperately looks like a blackbird who is scared out of safe hiding. Similarly, Esperanza also hides from the Guatemalan government as an illegal immigrant in Tucson.

It's interesting to note that on the other hand, the author concedes ample room for the readers to comprehend the enigmatic communion that both nature and women have time and again throughout the novel. During the hospital scene, Taylor couldn't hear the doctor's narration of Turtle's condition. Notwithstanding the agony, overwhelmed by pathos she veers into a painful observation of a cactus kept outside the window.

There was a cactus with bushy arms and a coat of yellow spines as thick as fur. A bird had built her nest in it. In and out she flew among the horrible spiny branches, never once hesitating. You just couldn't imagine how she'd made a home in there (Kingsolver, 1988).

This image of a cactus symbolically forecasts the mental oppression and physical turmoil that women generally have to put up with in the patriarchal society. In the above lines, the cactus which has bushy arms and spines as thick as fur denotes a male chauvinist society and the bird represents a woman who holds her life amid this dominant society. Through many struggles, the females in the novel still hold their life together especially characters like Turtle, though she faces lots of worst pasts still she had to hold her life to live in this world. Many characters including Taylor wonder about the 'spirit to live' which is inside Turtle's soul. In the same way, other females like Lou Ann and Taylor's mother also beat the domination once and for all in their life.

Thus, the representation of women and nature through the contextual characters namely Turtle and her dead mother in 'The Bean Trees' signifies the predominant persecution and myriad suffering that both nature and women are subjected in a male-oriented society. "She patted a handful of pine needles onto the mound. "Grow beans," she said" (Kingsolver, 1988). Here Turtle mentions the bean tree as her mother. When Cynthia the social worker found out that Turtle couldn't talk, she gave dolls to Turtle to demonstrate what happened to her in the past. This practice of Cynthia helps Taylor to find out that Turtle tried to communicate about her mother's death. After facing a

traumatizing event, a child might find it hard to articulate through words, she/he might express those past incidents through their dolls or drawings. Likewise, Turtle also demonstrates what happened to her through those dolls.

Besides, acts of human encroachments and aggrandizements of nature and natural resources under the pretext of geopolitics, poverty alleviation policies and modernization are also constantly reflected throughout the novel. Moreover, relocation from a habituated locale to a newer environment by force leads to resentment and anxiety disorders (M & G, 2023). For instance, on account of the ceaseless act of brutality by the authorities, people are forced to live as refugees in other countries and suffer a great deal of mental disorders. "Refugees represent a population whose living conditions have a strong impact on their mental health. High rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), more than other mental disorders, have been found in this group, with women having the highest incidence" (Vallejo-Martin, Sancha, & Canto, 2021). The characters both Estevan and Esperanza portrayed in *The Bean Trees* (1988) are Guatemalan refugees living as illegal immigrants in the United States. The outright tyranny and brutality Guatemalan government did not deter the couple to reveal twenty-one names of the teachers' union. As a result, their child is taken as a captive. Esperanza's brother and other two friends are killed and they are forced to live as illegal immigrants.

It's obvious when a government forces people to move from one place to another the geography of that particular place and the habitation will change, it brings different modulation in nature. This kind of transaction in nature will be brought by human beings for their own sophistication. Thus, the readers witness the threat of existence for nature and women in the novel *The Bean Trees* (1988). "Real Surviving in an "extremist action," taken "in a situation of extremity;" it is political conscientization that gives us our past, and simultaneously our future" (Daly, 1990). Here, Daly postulates that 'real survival' is an 'extremist action', with that clearance the readers can understand the struggle of surviving as women and nature in a patriarchal society.

4. Conclusion

Kingsolver novel revolves around nature and women, and their problems and these problems speak a lot about their character and their situation and the only way to save them from this kind of domination "Women will again be asked to be the "natural" wood-nymph and earth mother and to create places of escape from the destructive patterns of the dominant culture" (Dobscha, 1993). Women in the story were equally powerful as men which could highlight gender equality. Though the protagonist of the novel Taylor wants to escape from pregnancy yet the circumstances force her to be a guardian for an abandoned child named Turtle. Here, femininity of women is promoted and appreciated. At the end of the novel, all the characters, especially the women characters accept their lives just as destiny has in store for them. As Glotfelty postulates, "Everything is connected to everything else" (Glotfelty, Fromm, & (Eds.), 1996). It's confirmed that we need nature to live our lives on this earth and it is interconnected with us. Nature also played an important role here, which could signify women especially a girl like Turtle. Just as nature is vulnerable and helpless in the hands of greedy exploiters, little Turtle, too, is weak and voiceless like nature. Thus, they both could not verbalize or express their past abuse and become a symbolic representation of oppression and exploitation at the hands of merciless mercenaries in society. However depleted, both women and nature inevitably continue to be the integral phenomenon of human existence and their emergence is inevitable as Menaka & Mathews puts it "Women and Nature can be juxtaposed as they represent each other together as oppressed and exploited" (Menaka & Mathews, 2018). Consequently, nature and women are connected to each other and both are important for life to continue on this planet. Kingsolver reminds the readers that nature and women could give us a harmonious, amicable, prosperous and peaceful life provided both are taken good care of.

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