

## Nature - A Treasure: A Study of Barbara Kingsolver's

### *Prodigal Summer*

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#### Abstract

Environmental concerns constitute the need of the hour in the light of the havoc that has been wrecked by humans on their ecology in recent times. If we fail to realize the significance of the impact of the degenerating environmental conditions now, an apocalyptic probability seems imminent in the near future. Literature, which can be broadly defined as a study of life, is not untouched by the critical change that manifests themselves around it. Hence, a relatively new branch called ecocriticism is gaining currency in literary studies where by the literary texts are analyzed in relation to the physical environment portrayed therein. In *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver brings some questions which are in the minds of humans who are far removed from nature. All creatures are God's creation and he loves them equally. Thus loss of a kind of species may not be a tragedy for humans but it would be a tragedy for the creatures that are depending on it. So, it is the duty of human beings to protect and safeguard nature, the treasure given by god for a comfortable living.

**Keywords:** Eco criticism, natural surroundings, species extinction

Nature plays an important role in the healthy living of human beings. It is a part of the physical world, including plants, animals, landscapes, other features and products of the earth, as opposed to human's or human creations. There is no life on earth which does not depend on the other sources for survival. In one way or the other every organisms depend on the other and there is no single life which is exceptional to this fact. The relationship between living organisms is interconnected. One common fact that is applicable to most of the living being is the dependence on nature.

Human beings are dependent on nature and the environment like other organisms sharing the responsibilities of creation and its continuance. Environment provides air, water, food and many other basic essentials that are needed for life. It had always been supportive to life on earth but when man tends to conquer, manipulate and commercialize nature immensely an sarcastic confrontation followed by separation between man and nature hails as an aftermath. This distorted activity of man against nature has certainly left an impact on society and literature.

Since ecology is the study of the interactions of living things with their physical environment, human beings as a species of the animal kingdom have exerted

their influence on the ecosystem. The truth is that man owes to land as much as the land owes to him. Whatever human beings do to the earth, the deeds will be reflected on them. Eco Criticism is a branch of literary scholarship that explores the tangible connection between literature and environment, asking how nature is represented in literary works.

Barbara Kingsolver, a writer praised for her extravagantly gifted narrative voice, celebrates the spirit of nature in her novel *Prodigal Summer*. The novel is a beautiful work of environmental conscious with amazing description of nature especially the Appalachian mountain areas and its inhabitants – colourful Luna moth, different type of birds, coyote, etc. The characters in this novel are deeply influenced by these beautiful creatures in their delightful surrounding. These characters are environmental friendly and conscious about their natural surroundings. In the novel, *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver creatively portrays the environmental problems such as deforestation, harmful effects of pesticide and herbicide, and extinction of endangered species which directly affects all living beings in the entire ecosystem.

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* is a marvelous work of eco-conscience novel which deals with present environmental catastrophe and environmental ethical values which concerns human beings' ethical relationship with nature. So, Kingsolver very meticulously through these three main character's lives reveals environmental ethical concern towards their natural environment. The chapter 'Predators', features a female character named Deanna Wolfe, a wildlife conservative agent and a biologist in an isolated mountain environment. She is also a predator lover overseeing a den of coyotes that had recently migrated to the region. As an environmentalist Deanna had a great passion for conserving the wildlife and protecting the ecosystem from destruction by human economic activities. She is determined to protect the natural world from the threat of destruction by human activities. For instance, she once met a hunter, Eddie Bondo, carrying a gun for killing the prey and they ended up in a fierce quarrel. Deanna says, "I believe we're on National Forest land, inside of a game - protection area where there's no hunting (5). Deanna views hunting as a great threat to the ecosystem as she has great passion for nature.

Deanna also expresses her ideas on the extinction of species, especially about the predators like Coyotes. Coyotes are a closely related species of wolves. Mostly the coyote hunts alone and at night. They mainly eat mammals, birds, and snakes. This makes coyotes an important connection in natural because they play a critical role in keeping natural areas healthy. Coyotes are an endangered species hunted down ruthlessly by people. She loves each species and in her solitary life she sacrifices a lot to protect the endangered species. She says: "it was the size of a German shepherd, but no house pet, either. The dog that had laid this trail, if dog it was, would have to be a wild and hungry one to be out in such a rain" (4).

Deanna believes that each species has the right to persist in its own way. She states that "To kill a natural predator is a sin" (181). She claims that each and every species is important to humans to have a peaceful life on the earth. She considers

killing snakes as a foolish choice of humans. Snake is a single minded predator and humans are not the prey which it consumes. From the snake's point of view, humans are nothing and they don't exist. So she considers them as safer, Deanna says, "It just does not make any sense to despise that snake up there", she told Eddie. 'He's on our side. I hate mice, is what I hate - getting into my food. Making their nest in the drawer so my socks stink like mouse pee'" (268).

By presenting the dependence of nature and man, Kingsolver portrays nature as a strong force which is always on the human side. For instance, the lady bugs and other small bugs help in terminating Japanese beetles, aphids and caterpillars. Bats help in chasing out the mosquitoes as they can eat two hundred mosquitoes in a single night. People define animals as predators. Being terrified by the animals, people hunt even the predators like little gray fox that lives on mice and grasshoppers. In the novel *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver says, "hating predators on principle is like hating the roof over your head on principle" (269)

In the novel through the character of Deanna, Kingsolver talks about the extinction of Carolina Parakeet, because of man's merciless treatment to them. The Carolina Parakeet is one of the parrot species found in the eastern and southern parts of America. It lives in the old forests along the rivers. There are various reasons for its extinction. In order to make space for more agricultural land, a large part of the forest is cut down. Therefore their habitats are destroyed. They are killed in large numbers because farmers consider them as pests. But actually they are used to control invasive cocklebur. In the novel, Deanna talks with Jerry about Carolina Parakeet. She tells Jerry: "The Carolina Parakeet, which had gone extinct so soon after Europeans settled that little was known about it but this one thing, its favourite food"(249).

Not only Deanna, the other characters also express ideas on species extinction. Nannie Rawley is an elderly woman and an organic gardener, who talks about how the bees are going to be extinct. She resists Garnett's action to destroy the hives on the wall of the church. Garnett wants to collect honey from the hives but he uses chemicals to kill the bees. Nannie Rawley tells him the natural method of smoking to extract the honey from the hives. She tells people that bees are the main part of environment. Bees work to maintain the balance of ecological system. Nannie Rawley also tries to save salamanders from extinction. She claims that there have been ten to fifteen kinds of salamanders in the list of endangered species. Therefore she wants to save every creature on the earth.

Like Deanna in 'Predators', Lusa Maluf Landuowski the character in 'Moth Love' wants to live in harmony with nature. Lusa is a new comer to Zebulon country, who loves nature and considers everything as nature. Her love for nature is the reason why she fell in love with Cole and it is the same reason for the frequent fights between them. It is the nature that reunites them too. Being brought up in city, and longing for pasture and to enjoy its natural environment, she marries Cole. After her husband's death she compares her husband with nature. Her dream is explained as follows:

She rolled towards him and opened her blanket. He was covered in fur, not a man at all but a mountain with a silk, pale - green extremities and maroon shoulders of a luna moth. He wrapped her in his softness, touched her face with what seemed to be the movement of trees. His odor was with water over stones and the musk of delaying leaves, a wild, sweet aura that drove her to a madness of pure want. (81)

Kingsolver connects human world with the animal world using pheromones, the scent in the human and animal body. In the novel, Lusa talks about the scent cues animals use to identify their mates. She explains to Cole that humans depend on certain phenomenal cues. For instance the moths speak to each other and express their love across the fields through the scent. And it is because of the same scent people like one another for no reason. Just like the moths which send message through sent, the message about Cole's death is also sent to Lusa through the scent of honeysuckle. Even in her husband's funeral she thinks of moth and compares the people who came to the funeral as moths. And it is through nature she gets along in comradeship with her redheaded in-laws, who first considered her as "a curiosity, a nonsense of a woman" (45) because of her love for nature.

In the novel Lusa considers everything integrated with nature. In Lusa's dream Cole appears in the form of nature. Also Lusa compares herself with nature. She considers herself as a moth flying in spiral. Like moths, Lusa doesn't want to go in a straight line in her life, following others. When Crys suggests cutting down the trees, she explains that it takes a forest hundreds of years to form its current working system, with every component affecting another "Just how it is, a whole complicated thing with parts that all need each others, like a living body. It's not just trees, its different kinds of trees, all different sizes, in the right proportion" (356)

Man's life and nature are so interred linked that it is not possible for human beings to separate themselves from its influence. Therefore they have no choice but to accept both nature's bounty and adversity. Accordingly nature always obeys and subdues to the laws of man and geometry. But human actions demolish nature. When man goes against nature, nature doesn't co-operate with him. At present, people completely depend on pesticides, which make nature infertile. Kingsolver beautifully explains the plight of modern farmers in the novel *Prodigal Summer*, when Garnett talks about modern farmers who by new methods of cultivation, Nannie points out its negative impact:

Half the world won't eat the grain; there's a boycott on it. Any famer that plants it will go bank rupt in a year or two. That's modern farming for you..... In your Father's day all the farmers around here were doing fine. Now they have to work night shifts at the kmart to keep up their Mortgages. Why is that? They work just as hard as their parents did, and they're on the same land, so what's wrong? (279)

Also, when Lusa milks her cow in anger, the cow stops milking, teaching the lessons of nature "Her sudden anger had upset the cow enough to stop her milk for the moment. There was nothing doing until she let down again. Cows were a lesson in

patience” (149). Nature helps when they approach in a friendly way. Lusa’s cow cooperates with her in milking, whereas Herb and his cow are like oil and water, for the reason that he milks the cow with machines.

In modern days the distance between humans and nature bring about various diseases like cancer. In many countries people suffer and die by pesticides which contain high quality chemicals. In the novel, Nannie’s daughter dies because of pesticide. Pesticides kill the land and also kill the one who consumes its produce. In *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver brings some questions which are in the minds of humans who are far removed from nature. Garnett asks three questions in his letter to Nannie, one being why it is a human’s duty to protect animals and nature if humans hold no special authority among all species on earth. The second question is if the Holy Bible is to be believed, than why cannot humans destroy and use nature, since God has made them the guardians and keepers of the earth and asked them to subdue it. The third question is common to all humans in the world. “If one species or another of those muddly little salamanders went extinct, who would care anyway?” (188).

Nature is the abundant blessing given to us by god. Nature communicates and speaks a language which can only be understood by people who love nature. But they fail to cherish their survival in the environment and continue to damage and destroy them. This led to pollution, over exploitation of resources, global warming, natural serious issues. Even the most minutely invisible bacteria is interrelated in a huge and delicate organization. At present the whole world is on the outbreak of Corona virus which rapidly spreading across China and other parts of the world. People keep getting infected and dying on a daily basis. However, this virus could have easily been avoided if only people would have heeded God’s warning in the Bible of man’s injustice to nature against the wish of God.

God has created humans in his own image. All creatures are God’s creation and he loves them equally. Thus loss of a kind of species may not be a tragedy for humans but it would be a tragedy for the creatures that are depending on it. So, it is the duty of human beings to protect and safeguard nature, the treasure given by god for a comfortable living.

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