

## A STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *PRODIGAL SUMMER*

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### **Abstract**

In 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are facing many environmental crises on the earth such as depletion of resources of air, water, soil, side by side destruction of ecosystem and wildlife extinction. Environmental degradation such as natural hazards, drastic climate changes, global warming and many significant environmental issues changes earth's ecosystem. Our planet needs our serious attention and concern to preserve and protect the natural surroundings. Environmental ethics deals with important ethical questions regarding the relationship between humans and environment. It involves human beings' ethical relationship with the natural environment. Ecocriticism is the emerging literary field which focuses on the relationship between literature and environment. American author Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer: A Novel (2000)* deals with this environmental ethics and the contemporary topics of biodiversity, wildlife extinction, ecological preservation, natural sustainability, flora and fauna, conservation of species, and environmental justice. In this paper, I have chosen this novel to analyse the workings of environmental ethics in this novel. The aim of this paper is to analyse the environmental ethical issues especially the relationship between human being with the natural landscape and non-human animals. This paper explores the message of "land ethic" and environmental ethics that briefly reciprocates to Kingsolver's articulated environmental ethics.

**Key words:** Ecocriticism, Ecological consciousness, Environmental ethics, land ethics, keystone species, Eco-degradation.

“In wildness is the preservation of the world”

-Henry David Thoreau.

At present time, in twenty-first century, men’s requirements are becoming a primary focus at the cost of nature’s destruction of natural resources on earth. Industrial company, factories, capitalist technologies and marketing business are busy fulfilling people’s needs and their comfort. Because of this anthropocentric attitude, ecosystem is drastically changing. Climate change and global warming is the result of imbalance and loss of biodiversity in nature. Awareness about preservation of our natural resources is now one of the current environmental issues. People’s anthropocentric attitude towards nature causes unavoidable consequences of climate change, species extinction and depletion of natural resources. As nature cannot satisfy our greed, people need to maintain the balance of Nature’s ecosystem cycle and conscious about giving equal importance to non-human beings, wildlife, flora and fauna etc. In ecosystem or biosphere, every living creature is equally part of the nature. And harmony in nature is not possible without giving equal importance to non-human beings. Ecocriticism is a field of literary criticism, where the problems of environmental degradation portrays in critical way and help us to understand our relationship with non-human being and our treatment towards natural environment. It plays a significant role creating environmental awareness which is imperative in today’s world. William Rueckert, in his 1978 essay “*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco criticism*” defines ecocriticism as:

The application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world. (Rueckert107)

Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the pioneers in this field, defined ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). It explores the relationship between literature and the natural world with an attempt to raise awareness about environmental issues. Through literature, environmental consciousness makes us aware of our duty towards the environment. In natural surrounding one species’ life connected with other species. According to Barry Commoner’s ‘Law of Ecology’ *Everything is connected to everything else* (126). So everything is interconnected in our ecosystem.

In this paper I have taken environmental conscious novelist Barbara Kingsolver’s charming novel *Prodigal Summer* (2000). It depicts beautiful picture of flora and fauna, wilderness and the beauty of natural environment in North American mountains, landscapes, valleys and the natural beauty of the reservation forest. This novel is set up in southern Appalachia, Zebulon Mountain and country farm. Each chapter of the novels are subsequently titled, Predators, Moth Love, and Old Chestnuts. The lives of the three female environmental conscience characters in the novel Deanna Wolfe, Lusa Landowski, Nannie Rawley’s lives are interconnected with each other. They are reclusive and lonely individuals who have unique and strong views about their natural surroundings and they observe nature very carefully. Their respect toward natural surrounding and its inhabitants reflects in their daily lives. Throughout the whole year, their lives change drastically and realize that they, like other creatures, are not solitary. They are a part of a complex web that connects all living beings together and “how crucial a single carnivore could be to things so far removed from carnivory” (Kingsolver 62). The novel’s first chapter called “Predators” where we meet one of the major characters Deanna Wolfe, a reclusive wildlife biologist, also a Forest Service employee serving as a resident

biologist-ranger overseeing a section of the Zebulon National Forest. She has a deep knowledge of the people and ecology of the surrounding Valley and she try to maintain the ecological biodiversity by tracking down the wild animals' population, which she suspects that Eddie Bondo, the young hunter will threaten especially the population of coyotes. Eddie as a hunter comes to that valley looking for coyote but eventually get friendly with solitary Deanna. Later she tried to make him understand that a predator also has a significant role in ecosystem. In that forest coyotes are the endangered species, they called on ecological terms as “keystone species. In ecology, the concept of “keystone species” is one of the important factors in maintaining a larger community structure. “Keystone species” is a species which has an immense influence in environment. They have an important role to play in our ecosystem by maintaining an ecological community. Their extinction makes a big difference in entire ecosystem. Coyote is one of the “Keystone species” which has a very less population now than the earlier times. Their extinction can bring drastic changes in environment and it will cause loss of biodiversity. According to Arne Næss, every being, whether human, animal, or vegetable has an equal right to live and to blossom (Næss19). Here Deanna also feels the same way for every little creature's right to live on this earth. She as a forest ranger observes carefully the diversity in forest transition radically. As she knows the significance of biological diversity in every place:

Plenty of people had watched and recorded the disaster of eliminating a predator from a system. They were watching it here in her own beloved mountains, where North America's richest biological home was losing its richness to one extinction after another, of plants and birds, fish, mammals, moths and stoneflies, .... There were hundreds of reasons for each death—pesticide runoff, silt from tilling, cattle in the creek— but for Deanna each one was also a piece in the puzzle she'd spent years working out. (Kingsolver 63)

Here Deanna's environmental consciousness shows her ethical relationship with the non-human animals. As human beings are part of the society, plant and non human animals also an integral part of our lives. In ethical point of view they also have the right to live and to exist. In chapter “Moth Love” the story of Lusa Maluf Landowski's life also shows her ethical sense towards natural surroundings. She lives in a farm several miles down the mountain, she left her job as an entomologist and returned to live a farm life with her husband, but after her husband Cole's sudden death she finds herself unexpectedly marooned in a strange new place where she initially cannot find any attachment to the land. She was in dilemma whether to stay back and live the farm life or go back to the city Kentucky. But, finally, she stays in farm at her husband's house trying to accept her new environment, she becomes closer to nature and she starts to observe and appreciate it delightfully. Lusa had unique sense of love for moths and insects also she was very much aware of the value of non-human beings. Her love for natural environment and her environmental awareness to preserve and protect reflects in these lines:

“I will not cut down those trees. I don't care if there's a hundred thousand dollars' worth of lumber on the back of this farm, I'm not selling it. It's what I love best about this place.”(Kingsolver123)

She began to love “The trees, the moths. The foxes, all the wild things that live-up there”(123). Lusa believes in living in healthy environment so her refusal to plant Tobacco on her farm reflects her environmental awareness about land use. She ultimately found her own way to live peacefully and started rejoicing in natural surrounding and observes nature's wonder closely. Her newly found way of life shows her ethical concern towards environment. In chapter

“Old Chestnuts” the environmental issue of the use of pesticide and herbicide Kingsolver portrays through the character Garnett Walker, an old man who attempts to revive the American chestnut trees. He uses pesticides and herbicides to keep his land tidy and protect his saplings. Because of his using of chemicals, Garnett often dispute with his neighbour, Nannie Rawley, who is a devotee of cultivating organic fruits and vegetables. Nannie cultivates organic apples on the nearby orchard. She believes doing gardening in organic way quite opposite to the way of Garnett Walker, who completely trusted using the pesticide and herbicide to protect his close to heart old chestnut trees which are diminishing day by day and he believes in spraying pesticide to protect his chestnut seedlings. Like American conservationist Rachel Carson, Kingsolver also criticizes the use of insecticides through the story of Garnett Walker, an old man who attempts to revive the American chestnut trees. Garnett uses pesticides and herbicides to keep his land tidy and protect his saplings. But he is not aware about the deadly consequences of its effects. Nannie’s environmental awareness shows in her organic way of living. She has a special kind of admiration for living creatures; she gives respect to the non-human creature. Once in a month at Grandy’s bait store she used to buy every lizard from the tank and set them all free behind her orchard. She claims that “there were ten or fifteen kinds of salamanders in Zebulon that were endangered species, and said she was doing her part to save the environment” (Kingsolver138). At the end of the novel, Kingsolver shows in this three stories different environmental issues and problems associated with their lives. In ecocritical lens, these protagonists’ environmental consciousness and their ethical relationship with natural surroundings can be traced clearly. Aldo Leopold is one of the pioneer in the development of modern environmental ethics and in the movement for wilderness conservation with his eco-centric or holistic ethics regarding land. He is one of the influential American environmentalists. His ethics of nature and wildlife preservation had a profound impact on the environmental movement. One of his well-known quotes from his eminent book *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) gave us the idea of the conservation ethic or “land ethic”:

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.  
(Leopold 262)

Also, in his book *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Leopold emphasise that we understand ourselves as “plain member and citizen” of the land community rather than as its “conqueror” (Leopold 204). Our duty is to preserve nature and not to destroy the natural cycle. And Kingsolver nicely conveys her ecological vision and environmental awareness in this novel. In chapter, “*Thinking Like a Mountain*”, the concept of a ‘trophic cascade’ is put forth where Leopold realizes that killing a predator wolf carries serious implications for the rest of the ecosystem. This similar view can be trace in the novel where Deanna also understands the predator-prey’s function in ecosystem. In *A Sand County Almanac*, “The Land Ethic” is a chapter, where Leopold delves into conservation in “The Ecological Conscience” section. He wrote: “Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land.”(176) Leopold enlighten “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”(173). And he further explains, “a land ethic changes the role of humans from conqueror of the land community to plain members and citizens of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such”. (Leopold174) His ecological consciousness gives us a new vision to look at nature.

Here in this present novel, we witness this land ethic or preservation ethic in nature where land also is an integral part of ecological community. In environmental ethics, respect for the

land is an ethical concern where human being's relationship with nature has been considered critically. In the novel, Deanna as a wildlife conservationist, trying to protect the survival of coyote's family. She fights for the survival of that endangered species. She respects all the non-human beings and gives moral value to the fact that on earth all living things are countable and they all are interdependent and interconnected to each other in entire ecosystem. This novel gives us the important message about the awareness about maintaining the 'biotic community'. Deanna's story reflects that everything in life is interconnected with each other and every living being has equal rights to live. She shows her concern for the endangered species and struggles for their survival in Zebulon National Forest. She firmly asserts her respect for non-human animal "I don't love animals as individuals, I guess that's the way to put it," she further said. "I love them as whole species. I feel like they should have the right to persist in their own ways." (177). Coyote as one of the keystone species and their absence in wildlife can drastically change the ecosystem. So every species have significance in natural world.

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer: A Novel* (2000) is indeed a beautiful work of environmental conscious text 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 this novel, 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 entire ecosystem. These three stories, "Predator", "Moth Love", and "Old Chestnut" are interconnected with each other and give us a message of ecological preservation and consciousness towards environment. The first story is about the preservation of wildlife and extinction of endangered species especially saving the lives of coyotes under the poacher's eye. As the effect of eliminating a predator from a biotic community will create harmful environmental catastrophe in nature. Deanna's relationship with the land and its inhabitants especially coyote as a predator and an endangered species shows her ethical approach to the non-human animal and highlights the status of a predator's role and its huge impact in ecosystem. The second story reflects Lusa's struggle to maintain family relationships and her close relationship with the land, especially farm life which is far away from her city life. Eventually, she feels connected with her surrounding land. Lusa gradually understands her ethical relationship with natural environment. The third story tells about the ongoing awareness about the deforestation and the harmful effects of pesticides. Definitely Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* is a marvellous 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.

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