

Plenary Lecture

Nature and Art in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

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Abstract: Barbara Kingsolver's writings are intimately connected with her sustained interest in the world that is threatened by what Cheryll Glotfelty calls the "global environmental crisis." Because of this, the connection between the natural and the human world, with a heavy accent on preserving the natural, is at the heart of her novel-writing. The essay provides a brief exposition of her views on literature and its role in our time that is threatened by environmental degradation and demonstrates how these are realized in their fullness in the *Prodigal Summer*. Kingsolver locates the novel in a familiar space that abounds in all species of natural growth—farms, forests, trees, and a variety of animals—weaves three narratives, seemingly different yet interconnected, centred round three major characters, who are also trained professionals, and focusses on their thinking, actions and interactions with other characters, but making sure that they are vibrant and engaging beings and not mere mechanical ploys. Combining this mechanism with her skilful use of language, Kingsolver succeeds in producing a novel that is both pleasurable and educative.

Keywords: Ecology, Ecological consciousness, Environmental crisis, Land ethics, Location, Nature, Novelistic art

Barbara Kingsolver is a novelist, poet, essayist, and political activist. Her views on the nature and function of art/literature, about which she has written in her essays, are intimately connected with her sustained interest in the world that is threatened by what Cheryll Glotfelty calls the "global environmental crisis" (xv). Because of this, she uses her fiction as an effective medium for promoting awareness about the varied aspects of this crisis in an artistic and pleasing manner. This essay provides a brief exposition of her views on literature and its role in our times that are threatened by environmental degradation and then demonstrates how Kingsolver realizes her purpose in its fullness in the *Prodigal Summer*.

Almost in the manner of the classical and neo-classical writers and critics, Kingsolver comments on the relationship between reality and art in her essay “The Not-So-Deadly Sin”: “I believe the purpose of art is not to photocopy life but distill it, learn from it, improve on it, embroider tiny disjunct pieces of it into something insightful and entirely new” (258). This view of art comes close to the Aristotelian theory of mimesis, that “an imitation need not be a straightforward copy of the object imitated...nor need an imitation be an object which actually exists” (Heath xiv). Even while writers learn from life, they refashion what they see around them to create something new, which gives it a unique cognitive and aesthetic value. The idea of improving upon what is out there also echoes Sir Philip Sidney’s view that only writers can improve upon what is given to them: “Only the poet ... lifted up with the vigour of his own invention doth grow, in effect, into another nature ... her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.”

These views are rooted in the idea that writers have the ability and skill to “plant a seed in the good dirt of imagination” (258). In another essay, “If You Ever Want to Go Home Again,” Kingsolver emphasizes the ability of the writers to make things on their own: “We’re not keeping diary here, we’re inventing! Why can’t you believe we are capable of making a story from scratch?” (34). In a similar vein, she says that there are no real people in her fiction: “I can’t see the slightest point of that, when I have the alternative of inventing utterly subservient slave-people, whose every detail of appearance and behaviour I can bend to serve my theme and plot” (38). Elsewhere, she reconfirms: “I need characters to count on to do what I say What’s more, they must do it all convincingly” (258).

If Kingsolver clarifies that characters are meant to help her realize her purpose in a convincing manner, to serve the theme and plot of her work, it implies that she writes with a specific purpose in mind. And that, as will be demonstrated in the discussion of the *Prodigal Summer*, is geared towards “raising consciousness about the environment” (Glotfelty xxiv), which is also involved with ethical and aesthetic concerns.

Kingsolver is an avid advocate of this activity and represents nature in literature with an acute ecological awareness, both because of her upbringing and training. She studied biology as an undergraduate and did a Masters in ecology and evolutionary biology. Since her parents had to cope with depression, the result of greed that disregards human needs, and war born out of hate, “they reared me under the constant counsel to trust spiritual values ahead of material

ones, and look to the land for shelter. ‘A house can burn down,’ they said, ‘but a piece of land will always be there’” (“Small Wonder” 20). So she became an environmentalist. After four years of science writing, she took to writing fiction and published her first novel *Bean Trees* in 1988. She has followed it up by many more works of fiction and non-fiction. The result is her sustained interest in nature and its connection with the human, which is the main matrix of her fiction and seen at its profound best in the *Prodigal Summer*.

Kingsolver’s involvement with nature and the vision within which she sees the connection between the social and the natural and the earnestness with which she pursues that vision is clarified in several of her interviews. I quote from two of them to make my point. The first one is from her 1993 conversation with Donna Perry in which she clarifies that she writes books only on the subjects that she considers important: “I’m only going to write a book if it’s addressing subjects I care about. Otherwise, why write a book? It’s not worth the time, and it’s not worth the reader’s time, and it’s not worth burdening the world another pile of pages. It surprises me constantly that almost everybody else in the United States who writes books hates to be called a political writer. As if that demeans them” (154). This clarifies that she writes with a clear intent and is not afraid of being called a political writer.

Kingsolver elaborates on that in her interview with Stephen Fisher: “Certainly an appreciation for nature is an important feature of my work, and it arose in part because I grew up running wild in the woods with little adult supervision and I studied biology as a college student and then went to graduate school in biology. I am one of thousands of species that live in this place, and I don’t ever forget the other ones are there. Species diversity is a biological fact. I think a lot about the world out there beyond the artifice that human beings have created” (27).

The subject that figures in Kingsolver’s novels has two aspects: the cause of the environmental crisis and its reflection in literature. In a well-researched essay on the crisis, Lynn White Jr states that the roots of the crisis lie in the joining together of science and technology with “democratic culture.” This gave “mankind powers which, to judge by many of the ecological effects, are out of control” (12). One major outcome of this is what Christopher Manes calls the silencing of nature by veiling its processes, which humans do because of their “own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogues

in the natural world” (15). So there is need for a “viable environmental ethics to confront the silence of nature in our contemporary regime of thought” (16).

In the nineteenth century America, writers were deeply interested in nature, for they considered it an essential part of the human world. In fact, in their writings, the “human world is set against,” what Cynthia Dietering calls “the overarching background of nature” (183). D. H. Lawrence noticed it in his study of the American literature of the nineteenth century. Traces of this are evident also in the work of twentieth century writers like William Faulkner. After that, there has been a slow withdrawal of nature from mainstream fiction. This tendency of focusing only on the human has led many to realize that “fiction that never looks beyond the human realm is profoundly false, and therefore pathological” (Dietering 194). Many writers who took notice of this began to realize “how we inhabit the planet is intimately connected to how we imagine the land and its creatures” (Ibid 194). Finding that this was missing because the landscape had been poisoned by the brutal use of technology, a great deal of dystopic fiction drew attention to the manner in which this had happened.

Moving away from this negative way of looking at the relationship between the human and the natural world, Kingsolver writes fiction and non-fiction to re-establish a healthy and fruitful connection between the two, which is based on her sound understanding of how nature actually works. For this, she writes from a location that one may not normally associate with the place of work of a writer. She describes that in her essay “Knowing our Place”: “I’ve grown accustomed to looking up from the page and letting my eyes relax on a landscape upon which no human artifact intrudes. No steel, pavement, or streetlights, no architecture lovely or otherwise, no works of public art or private enterprise—no hominid agenda. I consider myself lucky beyond words to be able to go to work every morning with something like a wilderness at my elbow” (36). This is because she “needed only to be someplace where I could think straight, remember, and properly invent. I needed the blessed emptiness of mind that comes from birdsong and dripping trees. I needed to sleep at night in a square box made of chestnut trees who died of natural causes” (37).

Such thinking could be associated with crankiness, and Kingsolver has an interesting essay “God’s Wife’s Measuring Spoons” that provides details of unusual responses to her person and her style of work (246-266), but she considers herself blessed, for her good luck for “being able to work under the full-on gaze of mountains and animate beauty. It’s a privilege

to live any part of one's life in proximity to nature. It is a privilege, apparently, even to know that nature is out there at all" ("Knowing Our Place" 38). Living in land is not merely convenient, but also edifying: "It reminds us that our plans are small and somewhat absurd. It reminds us why, in those cases in which our plans might influence many future generations, we ought to choose carefully" (40).

After establishing her place of work right in the midst of nature, Kingsolver writes the *Prodigal Summer* to work out the synthesis of nature and art. Her clear statement of intent on this has been quoted by Linda Wagner-Martin: "I grew up chasing butterflies, went to graduate school in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, and still look at the world through the eyes of a scientist ... Leaving the halls of science for the world of literature and the humanities was like jumping across the Grand Canyon: I can plainly see a great divide that exists between two kinds of thinking. I wanted to write a novel to bridge that gulf somehow. Specifically, I wished I could explain a handful of ecological principles: speciation and natural selection, the keystone predator, genetic diversity and resilience, and the Volterra principle. Which (for instance) shows mathematically why spraying a field with pesticides actually will increase the number of pests in the next generation. These principles profoundly shape the world around us, in which we hope to survive So I took my leap across the Canyon, and *Prodigal Summer* is its name" (117-118). The bringing together of the natural world and the human world, with the specific intention of the preservation of the natural is at the heart of Kingsolver's art. In the process, she reaffirms the positive vision of Henry David Thoreau, about which she writes in "The Dispersion of Seeds," that he "dismissed the notion that poetry and science are incompatible, and captured for his readers the simple wonder we hastily leave behind in the age of reason" (238).

Taking Kingsolver at her word and ignoring Lawrence's well known warning of trusting the tale and not the teller might appear risky, but the discussion that follows clearly demonstrates that in her case there is no such risk. The novel *Prodigal Summer* successfully fictionalizes what she intends, in a pleasing manner. And therein lies her artistry. As a first step in this direction, Kingsolver frames an appropriate setting for building her narrative that is actually a combination of three narratives woven round its main characters and their lives. There obviously is nothing new about creating an appropriate setting for a novel, for that has been an essential feature of novel-writing right from the time the novel came into its own, to make it different from another variety of prose fiction, the romance. As an essential part of the

novel's architecture, novelists create a space that is recognizable and believable, quite often with historical markers, to make what happens in it acceptable. It provides an environment in which characters come to life, and is thus necessary for its very being. But in Kingsolver, location is much more than that, for it functions almost like a character. It has a personality of its own and it is through its varied attributes, which represent different aspects of nature, that the natural and the human are brought into a credible symbiotic relationship, in which the two affect each other in beneficial ways.

Prodigal Summer is set in Zebulon County, a familiar geographical terrain that abounds in all species of natural growth—farms, forests, trees, and a variety of animals—and away from the hustle and bustle of cities and towns. This is a fit place for its three narratives, in which the lives of its main characters are bound in close relationship with all varieties of life around them. In the beginning, the narratives seem independent of each other, but as they unwind at a slow pace, there is also a gradual unravelling of their interconnections, which becomes visible at the end of the novel. The narratives are prefaced with a poem, a wedding song, which functions like an epigraph for the novel, for it suggests the mood for entering into their world and the kind of things that happen in them. That is why it is in the form of an invitation to come out of the rooms that are choked with dead dreams, surely a sign of shame, and a preparation for a new spring in which “murdered dreams shall wake” and “mute birds shall sing” (xxiii). The narratives are propelled in the direction of creating this celebratory mood, which leads one of the characters to say that the summer is really a “prodigal summer, the season of extravagant procreation” (51).

Central to the narratives are human beings who are also professionals, with a clear understanding of their chosen area from nature's variety, backed by scientific study, which gives a distinct coloration to their personality. When we meet Deanna Wolfe in her cabin in the midst of a forest in the first narrative, we find that she has been there for two years, alone, with birds and animals, and trees for company. She is singularly free from civilizational contraptions and does not have even a watch. She senses time by the rhythms of nature around her, with which she is in constant communion. When she had been asked by a friend, how she could live alone with the quiet of her secluded location, her answer was: “When human conversation stopped, the world was anything but *quiet*. She lived with wood thrushes for company” (53). The same feeling she has also for solitude: “... solitude is only a human

presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen” (1).

Deanna attends to her job with unusual dedication, goes for trails every day, and it is because of her vigilance that “one of the most heavily poached ranges of southern Appalachia was becoming an intact ecosystem again” (59). She wants to ensure that coyotes, who had been hit hard because of poaching, are not hurt. One day, when she is confronted by Edie Bondo, with a gun in his hand, she rightly senses that he has come for hunting animals, coyotes in particular. So she makes it a point to keep him away from them in whatever way she can. But because she has been away from male company, and almost forgetful of being a woman, she is attracted to him physically, and ends up sleeping with him. A bit of her unhappy past, her childhood without her mother, her flirtations with her teachers, her unhappy marriage, pass fleetingly in her memory, providing additional basis for her attraction towards Edie. Though she has a physical relationship with Edie, Deanna does not allow that to interfere with her mission and does everything possible to ensure “the return of a significant canid predator and the reordering of species it might bring about” (62). It is because she is acutely conscious that “North America’s richest biological home was losing its richness to one extinction after another, of plants and birds, fish, mammals, moths and stoneflies ...” (63). She knows that “the return of a large, hungry dog might work to restore stability, even after an absence of two hundred years. Rare things, endangered things, not just river life but overgrazed plants and their insect pollinators, might begin to recover” (63). In short, she understands and makes efforts towards restoring balance in the natural system that works in a chain of interdependencies and keeps the ecosystem healthy.

In this narrative section, as well as in other sections, the dialogue is the key technique for building the ideational core of the novel, which is directly related to issues arising from human indifference to nature. Deanna tells Edie that “There’s people I love. But there’s so many other kinds of life I love, too. And people act so hateful to every kind but their own” (175). That is why, nature in the novel is not exactly like what it is in Wordsworth, valued because of its beneficial effect on the humans. In *Kingsolver* the accent is on recognizing that nature, which includes everything non-human, is important primarily in itself, because it has its own mechanisms for keeping it going, in which even predators are essential. That is why Deanna says: “I don’t love animals as *individuals*, I guess that is the way to put it. I love them as whole species. I feel like they should have the right to persist in their own ways” (177).

She makes a fine distinction between natural predators and fake ones, like cats, who, if let loose in the woods can be like firebombs. She also says that “herbivores tend to have shorter lives, and they reproduce faster; they’re just geared toward expendability. They can overpopulate at the drop of a hat if nobody is eating them” (178).

When Deanna succeeds in finding the coyotes and is really worried about their wellbeing, she issues a threat to Edie to make sure that he does not even think of harming them. Because of this, he disappears from the scene. When she finds that she is pregnant, she sends a message to her old friend that she would be staying with her to give birth to her baby.

There are two distinct features to this narration, which apply to the two other narratives as well: the dialogue between humans is used for a specific purpose: to widen the knowledge of ecosphere for promoting awareness about the relationship between humans and animals and the need for saving the animals from extinction. This gives the novel the flavour of a novel of ideas, the ideas that are not philosophical or metaphysical, but ecological, and meant to improve our understanding of how the human and the animal are bound to each other in a very sensitive balance that needs to be maintained at all costs. The artistry of Kingsolver lies primarily in making sure that her characters do not look like holders of ideas—mechanical and one-dimensional—for what they discuss arises from where they have been placed. They are drawn as vibrant beings, with unusual passions and dreams, which makes them interesting and also intensely human. In fact, almost all of them are well focused, but open too. That is why they keep on growing and also responding to the world around them. Towards the end of the novel, Deanne not only looks like a mother to be, she is also inclined to move back into the human fold and see herself as part of a larger family.

The second narrative is connected with Lusa Maluf Landowski, who has a complicated lineage, and is a trained researcher on moths. Drawn towards Cole Widener, a farmer, she marries him to stay with him in his house, where she meets his large family of five sisters-in-law and their numerous children. There she has new experiences. She senses that “the mountains breathed,” learns “to tell time with her skin” (31), and finds that nature that had been thought dead for fifty years, was “alive and kicking” (45). When Cole dies, she goes through a severe conflict, to stay on or to go back to her work place. She decides to stay, in spite of the hostility of Cole’s family, because she has a dream in which something moved into her blanket, “a mountain with the silky, pale-green extremities and maroon shoulder of a

luna moth. He wrapped her in his softness, touched her face with what seemed to be the movement of trees She pushed herself down against the whole length of him, rubbing his stippled body like a forest between her legs, craving to dissolve her need inside the confidence of his embrace. It was those things exactly, his solid strength and immensity, that comforted her as he shuddered and came into her” (79). When she wakes up and looks out from the window, she sees the sky and then the honeysuckle, and that proves a revelatory moment for her. “What he’d reached out to tell her that morning, as she sat near the window was that words were not the whole truth. What she’d loved was here, and still might be, if she could find her way to it” (80).

Luna seeks the help of Garnett Walker, who is a part of the third narrative, to raise goats for earning money to keep the farm going and take the vital decision of not growing tobacco, though that could have been financially advantageous: “... we’re sitting on some of the richest dirt on this planet, and I’m going to grow *drugs* instead of food? I feel like a hypocrite” (122), she tells one of her sisters-in law Jewel. Luna’s interactions with Cole’s sisters-in-law and the children of Jewel, who is on the verge of death because of cancer, form a sizable part of this narrative. Luna explains her position to her and, in course of time, she gains acceptability among the Wideners. She also changes and becomes pleasingly human and encourages the dying mother to let her adopt her two children. She passes new knowledge to the children because they are curious to know about things that they see around them but do not understand. That there are trees that are needed by bugs and bugs are needed by birds and birds are needed by us. That makes the forest “a whole complicated thing with parts that all need each other, like a living body. It’s not just trees; it is different *kinds* of trees, all different sizes, in the right proportions. Every animal needs its own special plant to live on. And certain plants will only grow next to certain other kinds...” (354). When the novel ends, she is firmly stuck there as part of the Widener family, for she realizes that she is “married to a piece of land named Widener” (383).

The third narrative consists mostly of the humorous jousts between Garnett Walker and his neighbour Nannie Rawley. The first battle between them is related to spraying. Garnett’s view is that “Success without chemicals was impossible” (87). Since Nannie is an organic farmer, who opposes spraying, he considers her a “deluded old harpy in pigtails” (87). But her reply to him is that by spraying, he is “killing all my beneficials. You’re killing my pollinators. You’re killing the songbirds that eat the bugs. You’re just a regular death angel”

(273). The two also differ on what Garnett calls the God's plan. In a letter to her he writes that the question we need to answer is: do we think of ourselves merely as one species among many or as keepers and guardians of the earth. And "If the Holy Bible is to be believed, we must view God's creatures as gifts to his favored children and use them for our own purposes, even if this occasionally causes this one or that one to get extinct after a while" (186-87). In the two previous narratives, this view has already been rejected. So Nannie too does the same. She reminds Walker how his own family lost its fortune because of the extinction of the chestnut trees. Far from affecting only a particular family, the extinction of any species will have disastrous consequences, because "Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads. Things you don't see can help you plenty, and things you try to control will often rear back and bite you, and that's the moral of the story.... The world is a grand sight more complicated than we like to let on" (216). Quite modestly, she tells him that "We're that foolish, to think we know how to rule the world" (217). God, in fact, "gave us the mystery of a world that can re-create itself again and again" (217). And He provided food for every beast and every fowl. Garnett's main interest though is to restore the chestnut tree to the American landscape and for this he is willing to work with the Chinese chestnuts.

The interesting part of this narrative segment is that the interconnections between the three are quite clear by now. Deanne plans to spend time with her old friend Nannie. Lusa is in touch with Garnett and Garnett is willing to meet his two grandchildren who have been adopted by her. The relationship between the two neighbours that began at a sour note turns into one of friendship. Nannie helps Garnett recover from his dizziness and he helps her with shingles to repair her house. They live in amity and peace. What Lusa experiences by living on the land of her dead husband could be applied to the novel too: "It seemed to Lusa that all these scattered accounts were really parts of one long story, the history of a family that had stayed on its land" (437).

Thus we see that in these three seemingly separate narratives, Kingsolver creates an interesting novel in which the lives of individuals, with all the drama that is possible in them within the confines of the space in which they live, are also meant to promote awareness about the relationship between the human and the natural worlds. This joining of the two is made pleasing by her control over her language and style, which has been commented upon by several critics, including Linda Wagner-Martin (129-30).

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