



**Ain Shams University**

**Faculty of Arts**

**Department of English Language and Literature**

# **An Ecocritical Reading of Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* and *Prodigal Summer***

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## Abstract

This research attempts a close reading of Barbra Kingsolver's econovels namely, *Animal Dreams* (1990) and *Prodigal Summer* (2000), using an ecocritical approach in addition to other critical theories with which ecocriticism intersects like Bakhtinian dialogics (dialogic interaction), feminism, post colonialism and literary trauma theory. The two novels show women struggles to save nature. These novels are environmentally conscious texts which make explicit statements about environmental issues, such as: water river contamination, the misuse of the pesticides and species extinction. In these novels, Kingsolver seeks to reject the human/ nature, culture/nature, woman/nature dualism.

*Animal Dreams* and *Prodigal Summer* emphasize one of the basic concepts in the field of ecocriticism which is the concept of interconnectedness. Moreover, both novels depict the exploitation and degradation of the natural world. Further, both novels underline a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world.

The thesis consists of three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 entitled "Ecocriticism and Literature" gives a background about the emergence of ecocriticism and how it intersects with other critical theories as well as the emergence of various genres of novels which tackle environmental issues and the author's background. Chapter 2 "Entanglements": Ecological Interdependence" deals with the fundamental connections between human beings and nature using Morton's theory of "entanglement". Chapter 3 "Complex Global Environmental Crises Narratives" shows how environmental crises are mainly caused by human meddling in the ecosystem.

**Key words:** Ecocriticism – Bakhtian dialogics – feminism - literary trauma theory - Barbra Kingsolver – *Animal Dreams* – *Prodigal Summer* – human / nonhuman relationship.

## Summary

This study attempts to analyze the problems which faces the environment and thus, these problems are reflected upon human's life in general. This study uses two eco-novels, *Animal Dreams and Prodigal Summer*, by the American writer Barbra Kingsolver. These two novels make explicit statements about the environment and its direct connection with human's life. In order to analyze these two novels, I used ecocritical approach which is mainly concerned with analyzing scientific, social and moral commitments in dealing with nature. Additionally, this ecological approach intersects with critical approach like Bakhtinian dialogism, Feminism, trauma theory and Post-colonialism. All these theories intersect together to analyze the reasons behind environmental degradation in an attempt to protect both environment and human's life. This appears obviously through the aims of the ecocriticism.

Accordingly, this thesis is divided into three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 entitled Ecocriticism and Literature gives a background about the emergence of ecocriticism and how it intersects with other critical theories as well as the emergence of various genres of novels which tackles environmental issues and the author's background. Chapter 2 namely "Entanglements": Ecological Interdependence" deals with the fundamental connections between human beings and nature using Morton's theory of entanglements. Chapter 3 Complex Global Environmental Crisis Narratives show how the environmental crisis is mainly caused by human meddling in the ecosystem.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to ecocriticism and the literature. It gives a clear definition of ecocriticism. According to the ecocritic, Cheryll Glotfelty "ecocriticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (*The Ecocriticism Reader*, xix). This fact enables many critics to

investigate social and scientific problems from different perspectives to analyze the ecological problems.

Ecocriticism analyzes the basic connections between various forms of oppression and intersects with other fields of criticism. For example, it intersects with school of feminism which is mainly concerned with the analysis of women's operation. It illustrates how women and nature are commonly oppressed. Ecocriticism attempts to give nature and women a voice. Moreover, ecocriticism shares an interest with Bakhtian dialogics in giving voice to the voiceless. This is one of the main concerns of both theories. Further, ecocriticism attempts to analyze the oppression which is resulted from traumatic experience. Furthermore, it analyzes the relationship between colonized people and their nature. Moreover, it studies how this relationship is affected.

This chapter also gives background the different genres of the novel and how it tackles the environmental problems. Moreover, it refers to the biographical background the author, Barbra Kingsolver. She studied biology and earned her Masters degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. She believed that the best thing to do is to simplify these ecological concepts and deliver them into vernacular language. Thus, she starts writing her novels about ecological concepts.

Chapter 2 applies the ecological theory of "entanglements" for the ecocritic Timothy Morton. The theory is mainly about the interdependence of different forms of life, human, plants and animals. He deconstructs the system of life and proves that nothing in that world can exist without the other. In other words, life forms are derived from other life forms. Then, he said that forms of life are infinite. One cannot know when its end will be. He calls for acknowledging all forms of life, like animals life and plant life.

These previous concepts are found throughout the incidents of *Animal Dreams*. This novel tells the story of Codi Noline who returned to her hometown after 14 years. She forgets most of the things about her hometown, Grace. She feels stranger to her hometown, not only she feels stranger to people, but to the nature of her hometown as well. Throughout the novel, Codi tries to regain her identity and to recover her memory.

Through the incidents of the novel, Codi will discover how human beings are so much attached to the environment and how forms of life of human beings, animals, plants and nature in general are interdependent. She found that human beings and animals have the same reaction when they threatened. She also found that her relationship with the land is affected as a result of her traumatic experience. So, she seeks to give voice to animals and to regain her identity.

The same concepts are applied to the second novel, *Prodigal Summer*. The novel tells a story of three women whose main concern is to defend the nature. The first woman is Denna Wolf is a ranger who is trying to protect coyotes in the forest. The second one is Lusa Landowski, a widow woman who struggles to learn farming concepts and to manage a farm. The third one is Nannie Rawley who challenges her neighbour about Darwinian concepts. These three characters will be connected by the end of the novels by family and community ties.

The novel starts and ends by a sentence which acknowledges the existence of different forms of life. Deanna can acknowledge the existence of the coyotes and can also acknowledge their rights in life. Also the second character, Lusa realizes the interconnectedness of human and non-human life through tracking the life form of the butterflies. Nannie also recognizes that spraying the plants with pesticides affects the form of life of the insects and tries to stop her neighbour from spraying trees.

Chapter 3 tackles how the environmental crises are caused as a result of being unaware about the fundamental connections between humans and non-humans. This chapter applies Lawrence Buell concept of “toxic discourse” and applies some concepts of the Environmental Justice Movement. Buell believes that for human beings to have healthy life, healthy environment should be found. So, he calls for putting environment and human health into consideration. Environmental Justice Movement also highlights the strong tie between human culture and his physical environment. Stressing this concept means saving the entire ecosystem and, thus, human’s life and cultural memory.

Accordingly, the incidents in *Animal Dreams*, takes place in a multicultural society which consists of mixed Spanish, Mexican and Native Americans. Moreover, Codi seeks recovery of the damaged land of her hometown as there is a mining company contaminating the river of the hometown.

*Animal Dreams* addresses the toxic discourse which expresses anxiety concerning the environment which is contaminated by chemicals. Moreover, the novel refers to the environmental degradation to which the land is exposed. Women responded to that kind of environmental degradation. By the end of the novel, women were able to raise the voice of the land and to defend it.

The same thing happens in the incidents of *Prodigal summer*. Female characters in this novel are attached to the land. Each one of the three characters in the novel defends the environment. Deanna defends the coyotes and struggles against their extinction. Lussa also struggles for stopping planting tobacco. Moreover, Nannie struggles against using the DDT and spraying the plants.

The conversations within the novel stress the importance of stopping meddling in the ecosystem as it is the main cause for environmental problems. Each and everybody in this



novel struggle for defending the land and protect it from being contaminated. Moreover, the novel insists upon the importance of cooperating between people in the community and their environment.

To conclude, this thesis is written to analyze human / nature relationship. It attempts to shed the light upon some environmental concepts. The representation of nature in both novels reveals a lot about human / nature relationship. Moreover, both novels include scientific details which enable to understand the issues which connect human beings with nature. Realizing the common things between human beings and nature allow to understand the origin of environmental crises and allow to try to find solutions and avoid other environmental problems.

## Chapter I

### Introduction: Ecocriticism and Literature

Ecocriticism became more engaged in the environmental problems especially after aggravation of the ecological crisis worldwide. The main aim of environmentalists and ecocritics, especially after the aggravation of the ecological crisis worldwide, is the desire to value the natural world and to represent the human / nature relationship in literary texts. The change in the climate resulting from the influence of human on nature poses questions for scientists, politicians and philosophers. Thinking about how we interact with the natural world became inevitable. The knowledge of human entanglements with nature affects cultural production and thus ecological awareness. Growing awareness of ecological problems helps in finding out ways to solve these problems.

This study aims to analyze environmental problems that are the main cause of many human illnesses worldwide in Barbra Kingsolver's novels *Animal Dreams* and *Prodigal Summer*. It adopts ecocriticism to help analyze human / nature relationships in literary texts. Understanding the interrelatedness of all creatures is important in avoiding the danger of environmental crises.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The introduction gives a general background about ecocritical theory and how it merges with other theories. In an attempt to analyze the relationship between these problems and human's environmental awareness, this study applies ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary theory rooted in the culture of ecological thinking which requires moral, social, political and scientific commitments in dealing with nature. It uses also trauma theory, Bakhtinian dialogism and feminist theory which intersect with ecocritical theory. Chapter two tackles how human beings' lives are deeply rooted in nature. Timothy Morton's ecological theory of "ecological entanglement" is used to analyze the

complex relationship between human beings and nature. The analysis of Barbra Kingsolver's novels *Animal Dreams* and *Prodigal Summer*, in chapter two, is based on Morton's theory and the other theories: theory of trauma, Bakhtian dialogism. Chapter 3 tackles environmental crises that took place as a result of human's meddling in nature and how this environmental crisis has a direct effect on human's health. In this chapter, Lawrence Buell's concept of "toxic discourse" is employed. Also environmental justice concepts, Bakhtian dialogics, eco-feminism and postcolonial ecocriticism are applied. Ecocriticism intersects with all previous theories, but it finds its roots in the science of ecology.

Ecology took hold as a popular scientific paradigm and a broad cultural attitude especially after the growing awareness of ecological problems. Critics find the cause of environmental problems in the ill practices towards nature which are collective result of political, economic and social ideologies. A key event which helped to spark the environmental awareness was the Dust Bowl incident or "dirty thirties" (Worster 26). It was ranked as one of the worst ecological "blunders" in history (Worster 4). This environmental catastrophe was an inevitable outcome of anthropocentric belief in the right to dominate and to exploit nature (4). Worster believes that this problem had economical roots in capitalism's enduring ethos whereby the concept of the "other" and exploitation is justified. Land is perceived and used in the same approved way. Worster remarks that ecological values were taught by the "Capitalist ethos" (6). Nature, according to the capitalists, was seen as an economic property that can be a source of profit and a mean of wealth. Moreover, Man has the right to use nature for his "constant self-advancement" and to extract from nature all it can produce (Worster 6). Furthermore, the community should help and encourage the individual to increase his personal wealth. According to Worster, capitalism believes that "community existed to help individuals to get a head and to absorb the environmental costs" (6). As a result of this culture, people destroyed the sods to make farms to grow wheat and

get cash. Moreover, they stripped the landscape from its natural vegetations to such an extent that there remained no natural defence for dry winds and that was the main reason for the dust storm that destroyed the region (Worster 13, 62). Capitalism was a decisive factor in this nation's use of nature (Worster5). Being aware that capitalism is an important factor, ecologists aimed at minimizing the exploitation of nature. This recalls the Enlightenment mentality which was responsible for the existence of dualism among which is the man / nature dualism. Such mentality culminated in Descartes's famous essay "Animals Are Machines" and Francis Bacon who expresses belief in man's God-given authority over nature in his essay "Novum Organum".

After this, ecologists start to shed light upon the incidents through which nature was exploited for economic growth and human's sake. Especially in the decades after World War II, political leaders directed "public monies" to expand production and to achieve constant economic growth (Ciment 497). This resulted in an unprecedented prosperity and broader expectation about the role of nature in the American economic growth. During the 40s and 50s, a state of uncontrolled excitement of dam building spread all over America. The U.S Forest Service opened huge stretches for lumber companies for building dams. The 1950s, witnessed major controversies concerning proposed dams on the Colorado River that led ultimately to the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam which begun in the mid-1950s and was completed about ten years later. Constructing this dam was another key event that raises the ecological awareness and triggers the enthusiasm for protecting the environment.

Exploiting the natural resources in that way ignited environmental protection activism. Aldo Leopold calls for setting environmental ethics. He wrote his *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) to examine the effect of nature and culture on each other and calls for environmental ethics. Moreover, he refers to human actions which disturb the balance of the ecosystem. He states that environmental integrity is based on people's attitude and behaviour

towards nature. Questioning the fixed notion about utilizing nature for human interests, Leopold attacks the fact that the relationship between humans and nature is governed by economic interest. He states that “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us” (x). He calls for a complete consideration for nature and developing an ethical relationship with land rather than using the natural resources by a utilitarian ethic. He believes that the cultural ideologies are reinforcing anthropocentrism. If these ethics were settled, human beings will be able to avoid many diseases and lead a healthy life.

A concern about human health grew from concerns over the increasing use of toxic substances. During the period of the Cold War, between 1951 and 1961, the United States carried out more than “126 aboveground nuclear tests” and this resulted in a great protest as there was a real fear from a nuclear fallout (Ciment 498). This is beside the pollution of the American rivers and streams which was discovered during 1950s and 1960s. For centuries, Americans used to get rid of wastes by throwing them in waterways. The fear of this invisible threat and the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* triggered the Environmental Movement.

In 1962, Rachel Carson shed light on the critical situation of the contaminated communities and inspired the contemporary Environmental Movement. She led a campaign which aimed at restricting the use of chemical pesticides. This campaign paved the way for realizing the critical situation of these contaminated communities. President John F. Kennedy who supported Carson’s campaign warned the United Nations that “every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be inhabitable” (215). Carson illustrates the destructing effects of the chemicals used in agricultural methods in her non-fictional book, *Silent Spring*. She launches into an indictment of DDT in particular and chemical pesticides in general. She confirms that these chemicals have the “power to kill every insect” and that the consequences of using pesticides are very dangerous (8). This

book generated widespread media coverage. Moreover, it helped in explaining complex, urgent environmental issues and brings ecological terminology into vernacular language. Carson inspired the Environmental Movement and many writers to document the destructive effect of the contaminated environment upon human beings' life.

The threat of the contaminated environment became reality and appeared obviously in late 1970s when the Love Canal neighbourhood residents began to notice a chronic of illness such as epilepsy, blood disorder, asthma, birth defects and miscarriage. This is because Love Canal neighbourhood was built on a landfill which was used by Chemicals Company which buried "100,000 drums of chemicals at the site" (Ciment 502). In 1978, Love Canal was declared as a disaster area. Consequently, many groups addressed toxic waste disposal.

It was noticed during the late 1970s and early 1980s that low income communities and communities of colour became more vulnerable to health and environmental threats (McGurty 71-72). Race played role in decisions concerning choosing the place to dump the toxic wastes. In late 70s, Warren County which most of its inhabitants were Afro Americans were horrified to learn that the state planned to build a landfill in their county to dump "forty thousand cubic yards" of soil that was contaminated with Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) (McGurty 71-72). The residents struggled against this decision which resulted in a great demonstration in "1982" (Taylor 12). Although they did not succeed in blocking the location of the landfill, they could grasp the attention of the Civil Right leaders. For many critics, Warren County struggles mark the beginning of the Environmental Justice Movement which grew to address the inequitable distribution of environmental hazards among the poor and minorities. It responded to such discrimination. Robert Bullard is known as the father of Environmental Justice Movement. Peter S. Wenz, one of the prominent environmental justice critics, set some principles for environmental justice in his book *Environmental Justice*. The

Movement originated in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Environmental Justice Movement called for the fair distribution of environmental benefits and duties and attacked the unfair distribution of environmental risks or hazards. Environmental racism aims to address such problems and to defend such communities. In the “mid 1980s environmental racism was becoming an integral part of the antitoxic movement” (McGurty 381). Warren County’s activism which challenges “environmental racism” became model for communities across the nation. The protesters argued that Warren County was chosen, in particular, because the residents were primarily poor and Afro Americans. Environmental Justice Movement supported the residents as it takes into account the equality between mankind and nature and the equality of all human beings. Its central principle stresses that there should be “equal access to natural resources and the right to clean air and water, adequate health care, affordable shelter, and a safe workplace” (Hofrichter 4-5). It expanded the notion of traditional environmentalism to include and emphasize the social justice.

Social justice is discussed through literary narratives which provide reading of environmental justice perspectives of individuals and communities responding to economic and environmental problems on local, national, and international levels. Lawrence Buell, one of the pioneers of ecocriticism, writes that the Environmental Justice Movement had a powerful impact on literary studies. Its narratives and investigations show how environmental issues are deeply connected with human issues of culture, gender, race, and class. Moreover, Buell considers environmental justice part of the “second wave” of the ecological thought (112). In this sense, ecocriticism intersects with the field of environmental justice.

Protecting the environment requires a change in the way we look at nature. “Ecocriticism dismantles anthropocentric discourses and may be regarded as fundamentally an ethical criticism which investigates and helps make possible the connections between man and nature” (Elbanna 95). This appeared obviously in the second wave Movement of