

# An Exploration of Ecofeminism in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

J.M. Gracelin Lydia<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. T. Subitha<sup>2</sup>,

## Abstract

Barbara Kingsolver's major themes delve into the concept of social justice, environmentalism, nature and human interconnection, feminism and awareness about degrading nature by anthropocentric activities. In *The Poisonwood Bible* she broadly explained her thoughts on ecofeminism through the mouthpiece of all the major women characters in the novel. The most important problem that human beings face today is the degradation of land and environment and its consequences on human existence. This paper attempts to take a study of Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* from an ecofeminist perspective. Within this book, power and domination, directly oppress both the female and nature.

**Key Words:** Ecofeminism, Earth, Oppression, Nature and Motherhood.

## Introduction

As literature serves as a reflection of society's foundation, feminist studies include an examination of the interaction between women and their surroundings. When examined by means of the eco-feminist lens, entangled motherhood reveals a deep relationship between the complexity of motherhood and the complex web of ecological issues. One can better grasp the symbiotic link between mothers and the environment by recognising the interconnectedness of gender, ecology, and social justice. This helps to construct a narrative that encourages holistic understanding. Ariel Salleh, a writer told that Eco feminists are more concerned about the global sustainability as gender justice. The main aim of eco-feminist is to emphasize that both women and nature must be respected. Greta Gaard's explanation of eco-feminism is as follows:

Ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology, which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities, is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminist theorists consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, speciesism and other social inequalities. (qtd. in Bhalla 1)

Greta says that ecofeminism is the oppression of woman and nature based on race, class, gender and so on. Eco feminists give much concern towards the welfare of woman and nature as their interconnectedness is very much important for survival. Eco-feminists advocate that the beliefs and values of patriarchal society result in the oppression of both female body and nature.

Judi Bari is the one who first proposed the concept of protecting Earth. She is the principal organizer of the Earth first movement. Greta Gaard, American activist and ecofeminist contributes to the ideas of queer theory, Vegetarianism and animal liberation. Susan Griffin, feminist philosopher known for her innovative, hybrid-form ecofeminist works. Dallie Mcpaque, ecofeminist theologian use God's body as a metaphor to represent the Universe. Carolyn Merchant, historian, her book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the scientific Revolution* are one of the Classic ecofeminist texts.

Living beings depend on it to grow plants and trees for food, water and shelter. When our mother Earth is injured by human activities it may take a huge time to heal. It causes several health issues and survival problems to human beings. One should save Mother Earth by planting more trees, use renewable sources, reduce the wastage of water, minimal usage of electricity, avoid plastics, preserve and conserve non-renewable resources, reduce pollution, save different varieties of flora and fauna, maintain a balanced ecological pyramid, etc.

Carolyn Merchant in her book *The Death of Nature* says that after scientific revolution, the nature and environment are exploited, transformed and used mainly for profit. Similarly, like nature women are used as child bearing machine and the reproductive abilities had been used, exploited and freely accessed. The patriarchal society began to justify its dominance and nature that both are inferior to them. They connect women with nature and framed the following words Virgin Earth, fertile land, and barren soil and so on and till today these words are commonly used in our society. Earth is either our saviour or destroyer. Though it has mother's qualities it shows its wrath and pain too.

---

**Corresponding Author:** J.M. Gracelin Lydia

1. Research Scholar, Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Marthandam, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.

2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Marthandam.

The novel selected for study is Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*. Her novels consistently delve into themes of social justice, environmentalism, nature and human interconnection, family dynamics, cultural clashes, feminism and so on. Her works often explore the complexities of the human experience and addressing the ethical dilemmas by highlighting the interconnectedness of personal choices with the broader societal and environmental consequences. Through her storytelling, Kingsolver emphasizes the need for awareness about the degrading environment, compassion, and responsible actions, weaving a rich tapestry that reflects the intricacies of contemporary life.

The main aim of this paper is to explore how females are dominated and controlled in this patriarchal society along with nature. Most of the male subjugate women as well as nature and thinks that they are superior to them. Eco-feminism is a social movement that expresses the oppression, subjugation and domination of the marginal categories like women, animals and environment. According to Janet Biehl, an American writer says about the relation of woman with nature as "the patriarchal stereotypes of what men expect to woman to be. These stereotypes freeze woman merely caring and nurturing beings, instead of expanding full range of women's human potentialities and abilities" (Biehl 15).

*The Poisonwood Bible* intertwines its narrative with elements of ecofeminism, exploring the intersectionality of gender and environmental issues. It is set against the backdrop of the Belgian Congo; the story depicts the Price's attempt to impose his Western Christian values on the African landscape. This imposition paves way for the exploitation of both women and the environment by patriarchal and colonial forces.

The Congo's lush and its diverse ecosystem serve as a metaphor for the feminine nature, symbolizing vulnerability and interconnectedness. Orleanna Price, the mother, is known for suffering and resilience of women as she navigates this oppressive environment and her tumultuous family dynamics. The exploitation of the Congo reflects the exploitation of women, emphasizing the interconnected abuse of both nature and female. Ecofeminist themes emerge through the Price's family's struggles with the harsh Congo environment, mirroring the exploitation of women and nature. The novel explains the consequences of patriarchal dominance and colonialism on both women and the environment.

The role of a mother is to protect her children and is considered as one of the fundamental and instinctual aspects of motherhood. Mothers play an important role in providing a safe and nurturing environment for their children in all aspects of life. Offering love and a sense of security helps the children develop a strong base for healthy emotional development: "Only by life's best things are your children protected – this much I surely believe" (PB 505).

Throughout the novel, Price sisters supported their mother in all the household works. In recent years young girls got awareness that they should not dependent on others for everything. They should be independent and learn things on their own to accomplish their dreams. In this novel Orleanna Price made her daughters to learn all the household works so that they can be independent and find their own life without much struggles.

Adah and Ruth May helped unpack and set up house - keeping. The first task was to pull out all the mosquito netting and stitch it into tents to cover our four identical cots and my parents' larger one. Malaria is our enemy number one. Every Sunday we swallow quinine tablets so bitter your tongue wants to turn itself inside out like a salted slug. (PB 35)

As a mother Orleanna wanted all her daughters to get proper education and become scholars. She knew the significance of education and emphasizes her daughters to excel in it. In Congo there is a severe threat due to malaria and everyone finds it difficult to escape from the disease causing mosquitoes. Quinine is a drug taken to reduce malarial infection in human beings. She cares her children and husband in a proper way and serves as a wonderful mother by designing her destiny.

The novel highlights the instances where Congolese men exhibit patriarchal behaviour, it is also important to note that the narrative does not present a monolithic view of the Congolese culture. Kingsolver's portrayal of gender dynamics in the novel emphasize the cultural clashes and misunderstandings between the American Price family and the native people of the Congo. Leah says that "I'd noticed Congolese men didn't treat even their own wives and daughters as if they were very sensible or important. Though as far as I could see the wives and daughters did just about all the work" (PB 229).

The idea of feminism promotes equal rights and opportunities for women in the political, social, and economic spheres. The intellectual, political, and social movement known as eco-feminism emphasises the connection between the exploitation of environment and the subjugation of women. It states that all life is fundamentally interrelated.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, ecofeminism is explained through narratives intertwining the environmental and feminist concerns. She highlights the interdependence of women and nature, makes to recognize and challenge the patriarchal and ecological injustices. Kingsolver's storytelling enhances an ecofeminist perspective that underscores imperative of advocating for both gender equality and the environmental sustainability.

## Works Cited

1. Bhalla, Ambika. "Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*" *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, vol 12, no. 10, 2012.
2. Biehl, Janet. *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*. Black Rose Books, 1991.
3. Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Poisonwood Bible*. Harper Collins, 2005.