

Postcolonial Ecofeminist Perspectives on Womanhood and Nature in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of womanhood and its complex relationship with the natural world in Barbara Kingsolver's acclaimed novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*. Adopting an ecofeminist perspective, the analysis explores how the novel's female protagonists navigate the challenges and conflicts inherent in their gendered experiences within the context of the Congolese environment. This paper focuses on Kingsolver's narrative strategies, including the use of multiple narrative perspectives, lyrical descriptions, and mythological allusions, serve to foreground the intersections of gender, ecology, and postcolonial politics. Through textual examples, it is shown how the female characters' embodied connections to the land, their struggles against patriarchal domination, and their resistance to environmental degradation all contribute to a detailed exploration of ecofeminist themes.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Womanhood, Nature, *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver, Postcolonial Literature

What happens when Feminism, Postcolonialism and Environmentalism “come together”?

Postcolonial Ecofeminism.

In literary studies ecofeminism is a theoretical approach that explores the interconnections between women and nature. Ecofeminists argue that there is a fundamental link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment (Birkeland 13; Plumwood, 20; Shiva 37). They contend that patriarchal systems of domination rely on the subordination of both women and nature, which are viewed as inferior, passive, and subservient to masculine power and control. Ecofeminism emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, recognizing that various forms of oppression, such as gender, race, class, and species, are interconnected and must be addressed holistically (Sturgeon, 4).

Ecofeminist approach involves developing critical analyses and practical strategies to challenge these systems of domination and cultivate more equitable and sustainable relationships with the natural world: 1) Many ecofeminists draw upon diverse spiritual and cultural traditions that revere the sacred and interconnected nature of the Earth, often in contrast to the dominant Western, patriarchal, and anthropocentric worldviews (Shiva 65; Plumwood 19); 2) ecofeminists advocate for the reclamation of more holistic, relational, and ecocentric perspectives that challenge the dualistic and hierarchical thinking that underpins environmental exploitation; 3) it

also engages with decolonial and postcolonial theories, exploring how the domination of women and nature is intertwined with the legacy of colonialism and the ongoing processes of neocolonialism (Huggan & Tiffin 87; Emery 2000, 95; Emery 2002, 97); 4) they emphasize the importance of centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities in the struggle for environmental and social justice; 5) scholars have analyzed how literary and cultural representations of women and nature reflect and challenge dominant power structures (Dunlap 109; Strehle 208; Strehle 125).

As mentioned above ecofeminism also engages with decolonial and postcolonial theories. Postcolonial ecocriticism has been developed thanks to fusion of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism. It explores how issues of colonialism, imperialism, and the legacy of colonial exploitation are interconnected with questions of the natural environment, environmental degradation, and the relationship between humans and nature (Huggan and Tiffin 1-2). According to Huggan and Tiffin viewpoint the key aspects of postcolonial ecocritical literary studies may include the followings: 1) analyzing how colonial and imperial practices have shaped patterns of environmental destruction, resource extraction, and the marginalization of indigenous populations and traditional ecological knowledge; 2) examining how literature, art, and other cultural texts from postcolonial contexts engage with environmental themes and the politics of the natural world; 3) investigating the ways in which race, gender and class interact with environmental justice and ecological concerns in the colonial and neocolonial context; 4) understanding the perspectives of indigenous, marginalized, and formerly colonized peoples in addressing environmental crises; 5) and Critiquing the Eurocentric and anthropocentric biases that have often characterized mainstream ecocriticism and environmental discourses. By bringing postcolonial and ecological concerns together, postcolonial ecocriticism offers a more holistic and politically-engaged approach to understanding the complex relationships between human societies, cultures, and the natural world, especially in the context of colonial histories and ongoing processes of globalization (Huggan and Tiffin 1-21).

Ecofeminism and postcolonial ecocriticism share a common concern for the interconnections between the oppression of women, minorities, and the natural environment (Birkeland 13-15; Huggan and Tiffin 4-6). Ecofeminism and postcolonial ecocriticism are united by their shared commitment to examining how patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist systems have exploited and marginalized women, indigenous communities, and the natural world (Birkeland 13-15; Huggan and Tiffin 4-6). Ecofeminists and postcolonial ecocritics often draw from similar theoretical frameworks, such as feminist theory, critical race theory, and political ecology, in their analyses (Plumwood 23-25; Sturgeon, 1-3). This conceptual overlap suggests a fusion of these fields, as they share foundational analytical tools and perspectives. Furthermore, the roots of ecofeminism can be traced to postcolonial contexts, as exemplified by the work of Vandana Shiva in India. Shiva's scholarship highlights the intersections between gender, environment, and the legacies of colonization (Shiva 1-3).

In this way, Postcolonial Ecofeminism inherits feminism's focus on challenging patriarchal structures and the subjugation of women; postcolonial theory's examination of how colonial power dynamics have marginalized indigenous peoples and non-Western societies; environmentalism's emphasis on the protection and preservation of the natural world, in turn, highlights how the exploitation of land, resources, and ecosystems is often tied to the same patriarchal and imperialist logics that subjugate both women and colonized populations.

Womanhood and the Natural World in The Poisonwood Bible

Postcolonial Ecofeminist concerns are also evident in literary works, such as Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*. It was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and won the Women's Prize for Fiction (formerly the Orange Prize) in 1999. This novel explores the entanglement of gender, race, and environment within a colonial African setting, exemplifying the cross-pollination of these two fields (Emery 93-96; Dunlap 107-111; Strehle 207-211). Kingsolver's 1998 novel, "*The Poisonwood Bible*," offers a profound exploration of themes of gender, postcolonial politics, environmentalism and religion through the eyes of female protagonists as they navigate the challenges of living in a new and vastly different culture. The novel is considered one of Kingsolver's most acclaimed works of fiction as it has been praised for its vivid depiction of the African setting and the detailed character development. Set against the backdrop of the Belgian Congo's (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) tumultuous political upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s, the novel follows the Price family, a missionary clan headed by the domineering patriarch, Nathan, and centers on the stories of the four Price women: Orleanna, the mother, and her four daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May. The life experiences of the female characters uncover Kingsolver's ecofeminist themes, illuminating the ways in which gender, the natural world, and the legacies of colonialism converge to shape the lived realities of women in the global South.

Mother of the family – Orleanna, for instance, is depicted as a complex figure, trapped within the confines of her patriarchal role yet developing a profound, embodied connection to the Congolese landscape. As she reflects on the traumatic experiences of her family, Orleanna laments, "*I am the mother of four doomed children. I am the woman who bought a ticket to this place, the place where my life has been undone*" (50), underscoring the ways in which the unyielding Congolese environment has irrevocably shaped her sense of identity and agency. Orleanna is a feminine name of French origin, derived from the city of Orléans in France. This connection to France is significant, as the novel explores the legacy of European colonialism in the Belgian Congo. The name "Orleanna" may evoke the concept of "New Orleans", which was a major hub of the transatlantic slave trade. This allusion connects Orleanna's character to the history of slavery and oppression that is deeply intertwined with the colonial experience in Africa. Within the narrative, Orleanna functions as a foil to her husband Nathan's rigid and domineering religiosity. As the story unfolds, Orleanna undergoes a gradual awakening and transformation, coming to recognize the harm caused by the family's missionary work and the colonial project more broadly. Her name thus symbolizes her own journey from passivity to agency, as she ultimately finds the strength to assert her own voice and reject the patriarchal structures that have constrained her. The name "Orleanna" therefore represents the complex personal and political awakening of the character over the course of the novel. In this way, Kingsolver uses Orleanna's name to establish her as a central figure who embodies the novel's ecofeminist themes and its critiques of colonial and patriarchal power structures. The name serves as a multifaceted signifier of Orleanna's evolving role and perspective within the broader narrative.

Kingsolver presents the complex and often contradictory experiences of womanhood, as the female characters navigate their embodied connections to the land, their struggles against patriarchal domination, and their resistance to environmental degradation. Kingsolver's portrayal of the Price daughters' individual narratives in "*The Poisonwood Bible*" plays a pivotal role in the novel's representation of gender and postcolonial politics. The significance of the daughters' names is vivid in characterization, as Kingsolver implies symbolic meaning that further enhances the depth of her thematic exploration. The biblical resonance of the daughters' names connects them to scriptural narratives dealing with themes of exile, oppression, and the search for identity. Kingsolver employs these biblical allusions and parallels to examine the daughters' experiences

as they confront the challenges and consequences of their father's missionary work in the postcolonial African setting. (Emery 95; Strehle 211) For instance, the name "Rachel" evokes the biblical figure associated with maternal love and protective instincts, yet the eldest Price daughter embodies the antithesis of these traits. As the narrative reveals, Rachel is depicted as a self-absorbed and materialistic young woman who initially resists adapting to the harsh realities of the Congolese landscape, musing, *"I can't imagine how anyone can live like this"* (53). This exhibits a contrast between the biblical Rachel and Kingsolver's portrayal highlights the ways in which traditional gender roles and Western cultural assumptions can hinder women's ability to navigate the challenges of the postcolonial context.

In contrast, Leah is associated with endurance, perseverance, and the capacity for self-sacrifice – qualities that are embodied in the narrative arc of the second daughter. "Leah's journey reflects Kingsolver's ecofeminist themes, as the young woman is drawn to her father's evangelical mission but ultimately comes to question the colonial and patriarchal structures that underpin it." (Dunlap 113) As Leah reflects, *"I have become a different person, one who can look at these people and see them as my own"* (315), underscoring the ways in which the Congolese landscape has left a painful mark on the characters' sense of self and their resistance to the legacies of colonial exploitation.

The name "Adah," derived from the Hebrew word for "ornament," underscores the unique perspective that the disabled twin sister offers. Adah's keen observation and sardonic wit serve as a counterpoint to the more overt political narratives of her siblings, as she endures disability and gender challenges at the postcolonial context. As Adah observes, *"I am the greatest disappointment of all"* (87), highlighting the ways in which marginalized identities can offer alternative modes of resistance and resilience.

Finally, the youngest daughter, Ruth May, represents the most tragic embodiment of the novel's themes. Her name, which evokes the biblical figure known for her steadfast loyalty and devotion, serves as a poignant contrast to the devastating consequences of the Price family's colonial entanglements. Ruth May's death at the hands of a venomous snake, described as *"the smallest, most innocent of all"* (433), serves as a potent symbol of the fragility of life in the Congolese landscape and the ways in which the natural world, gender, and postcolonial politics converge to shape the lived experiences of the most vulnerable members of society.

Through the separate narratives of the Price daughters, Kingsolver brings to light the problems of gender, nature and postcolonial politics through the prism of religious symbolism. Each character's journey, enriched with the symbolic meaning of their names, serves to illuminate different aspects of the complex interplay between individual identity, familial expectations, the natural environment, and the sociopolitical upheavals of the Congo. By centering the stories of these diverse female protagonists, the novel offers a rich and nuanced understanding of the ways in which gender, ecology, and the legacies of colonialism converge to shape the lived experiences of women in the global South. The female characters' stories become a lens through which to examine the ways in which colonial exploitation, resource extraction, and missionary evangelization have shaped the lived experiences of women in the region.

Kingsolver's lyrical prose style also contributes to the novel's ecofeminist sensibilities. Her vivid descriptions of the Congolese landscape and its flora and fauna enriches the setting, representing power and glory, sound and fury of the savage beauty as Orleana admires it: *"The forest is alive and stirring, a living thing that breathes and grows. Vines as thick as my wrist twine up the trunks of the trees, strangling them, draping them in lush green shawls. Flowers bloom from the very branches, as if the trees had put out their own blooms, golden and purple and crimson. The air is so wet and warm it feels like you could eat it, like taking a bite of sweet green mango."* (p. 61) The forest is personified as a *"living thing that breathes and grows,"* and

the flora is depicted as actively "*blooming*" and "*twining*" around the trees, rather than being passive elements. Kingsolver's lyrical language, with its emphasis on taste, touch, and texture, challenges the colonial mindset that views the landscape as a resource to be exploited and controlled. Instead, this ecocentric perspective encourages the reader to perceive the Congolese environment as a dynamic, sentient entity worthy of respect and care. This excerpt contrast to the Prices' attempts to impose their Christian patriarchal beliefs and "civilize" the land, as exemplified by the father Nathan's rigid religious dogmatism and failed efforts to cultivate a "garden of Eden" in the hostile climate. Throughout the novel, Kingsolver's evocative depictions of the Congolese setting foreground the intrinsic value of the natural world, rather than its instrumental value to colonial interests. This lyrical, ecocentric worldview is a key component of the novel's overarching ecofeminist perspective.

The writer incorporates mythological allusions that situate the narrative within a broader transnational and transhistorical frame. One of the most prominent mythological references in the novel is the invocation of the Demeter-Persephone myth from Greek mythology. This archetypal story of a mother goddess and her daughter kidnapped by the god of the underworld resonates powerfully with the central mother-daughter relationships in *The Poisonwood Bible*. The parallels between Orleanna Price and the figure of Demeter are particularly striking. Like the Greek goddess who mourns the loss of her daughter Persephone, Orleanna suffers the tragic death of her youngest child, Ruth May, as well as the metaphorical "loss" of her other daughters to the colonial experience. Orleanna's gradual transformation from passive acquiescence to active defiance of patriarchal authority mirrors Demeter's journey from grief to righteous rage. Moreover, the Demeter-Persephone myth symbolizes the cyclical patterns of loss, renewal, and the perpetual struggle against forces of oppression. This mythic framework amplifies the novel's ecofeminist themes, as the mother-daughter bond represents a sacred connection to the natural world that must be protected from exploitation. References to figures like Demeter and Persephone leads to universal themes of environmentalism, matriarchal power, and the struggle against patriarchal oppression. These mythic resonances amplify the novel's postcolonial critique by locating the Prices' experience within a global matrix of gendered and ecological exploitation.

Kingsolver also invokes the figure of the Yoruba river goddess Oshun, who serves as a powerful counterpoint to the Christian patriarchal order embodied by the Price family. Oshun's associations with fertility, sensuality, and the defense of women's rights resonate with the experiences of the Price daughters as they navigate the colonial context. The presence of Oshun, alongside other African divinities like Mbumba, disrupts the Prices' attempts to impose their own religious dogma. These mythological references affirm the validity and agency of indigenous spiritual traditions in the face of colonial erasure.

Furthermore, Kingsolver's use of myth extends beyond the specifically gendered and ecological realms. *The Poisonwood Bible* also contains allusions to the Promethean myth, which further expand the novel's thematic scope. The Promethean myth, in which the Titan Prometheus steals fire from the gods to give to humanity, symbolizes the human strive for knowledge, technological advancement, and liberation from divine/natural constraints. However, this quest for progress often comes at a great cost, as exemplified by Prometheus's punishment of being chained and having his liver eternally devoured. Kingsolver draws upon this archetypal narrative to explore the Price family's own pursuit of "progress" and "enlightenment" in the colonial context of the Belgian Congo. The patriarch, Nathan Price, embodies the Promethean figure, driven by a fervent Christian zeal to "*civilize*" the "*heathen*" Africans and transform the land through agricultural modernization. For instance, Nathan's attempts to cultivate a "garden of Eden" in the inhospitable Congolese environment parallels Prometheus's theft of divine fire. This disregard for the realities of the local ecology finally leads to disastrous consequences, both for

the Price family and the indigenous communities they seek to "save." The novel also contains more direct Promethean allusions, such as when one of the daughters, Leah, reflects on the colonial project's devastating impact: "*We are the fire-bringers, the fire-tenders, the fire-keepers. We are the lungs of the world, now perforated, a net of holes... We are the lungs of the world, and we are collapsing from within.*" (p. 444) Here, Leah's metaphorical identification of the colonizers as "fire-bringers" evokes the Promethean myth, while her lament over the "perforated" and "collapsing" lungs of the world underscores the catastrophic consequences of this hubristic quest for technological and ideological "progress." Throughout the novel, Kingsolver's Promethean allusions invite readers to consider the broader implications of the colonial enterprise, which often cloaks its exploitative nature under the guise of enlightenment and modernization. The *Poisonwood Bible*'s engagement with this mythic framework expands the narrative's critique beyond the gendered and ecological realms, positioning the colonial experience within a universal human struggle for liberation and self-determination.

Hence, Kingsolver's "*The Poisonwood Bible*" exhibits a profound and compelling examination of the interconnection between gender, ecology, and postcolonial politics through the narratives of its female protagonists. By situating these stories within the specific historical and geographical context of the Belgian Congo, the novel provides a nuanced and insightful exploration of the ways in which the natural world, patriarchal structures, and the legacies of colonialism converge shape the life experiences of women in the global South. The mythological allusions have become a vital narrative strategy through which Kingsolver amplifies the postcolonial, ecofeminist, and humanist themes at the heart of her sweeping, polyphonic novel. The mythological underpinnings of *The Poisonwood Bible* serve to elevate the personal narratives of the characters into a broader, archetypal level. By drawing upon these transnational mythic frameworks, Kingsolver situates the colonial experience of the Price family within a global history of power imbalances, environmental degradation, and the ongoing resistance against systems of oppression. Postcolonial ecofeminist approach applied to this novel demonstrates interconnections between the oppression of women, minorities, and the natural environment.

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