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**Towards Ecological Sustainability: Ecofeminist and Post humanist  
Perspectives in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer***

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**ABSTRACT**

With growing ecological concerns revolving around issues like biochemical pollution, acid rain, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species and the greenhouse effect, fiction has turned polemically environmental. Eco-critics explore the dynamics of the relationship between human beings and the natural world and examine the social, cultural and historical factors which shape their relationship. Possessing nature-centered perspective and earth-centered consciousness, ecocritics and theorists determine the direct or indirect relationship between the literary text in question and the physical environment outside. The very core principle of all environmental criticism is that human culture and literature are inevitably affected by earth and specifically by nature, directly or indirectly. Eco-feminism bridges the gap between feminism and ecocriticism and asserts that liberation of women can lead to the liberation of nature. Many scholars view it as asserting the intertextuality of all aspects of life and viewing the oppression of women and exploitation of nature as being interconnected. The humanist ideals of the autonomous, rational and sovereign individual having dominion over nature is also being challenged by the posthumanist perspective, thereby accentuating the interconnectedness, entanglement, fluidity and co-evolution of the human and non-human forms of existence. The notion of anthropocentrism and speciesism calls for rejection and replacement with a new and more inclusive form of ethical diversity which encourages ethical treatment towards animals and the environment. This paper approaches Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Prodigal Summer* through the framework of critical posthumanism and ecofeminism to analyse the synthesis of human and non-human suffering at the hands of exploitative patriarchal ideology and examine the role of female education in the liberation and sustenance of not only women characters but also the ecology.

Keywords: intertextuality, ecosystem, posthumanism, sustenance, speciesism, anthropocentrism.

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With growing ecological concerns revolving around issues like biochemical pollution, acid rain, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species and the greenhouse effect, fiction has turned polemically environmental. Ecocriticism, a critical approach to literature and culture emerged in 1990 as a response to increasing concerns to ecological depletion and degradation and attempts were made to examine the representation of nature in literature and other art forms. Eco-critics explore the dynamics of the relationship between human beings and the natural world and examine the social, cultural and historical factors which shape their relationship. Possessing nature-centered perspective and earth-centered consciousness, ecocritics and theorists determine the direct or indirect relationship between the literary text in question and the physical environment outside. The very core principle of all environmental criticism is that human culture and literature are inevitably affected by earth and specifically by nature, directly or indirectly. Eco-feminism, a significant branch in eco-critical study, bridges the gap between feminism and ecocriticism. Many scholars view it as asserting the intertextuality of all aspects of life and viewing the oppression of women and exploitation of nature as being interconnected. Androcentric and patriarchal ideology is believed to be the root cause of female oppression and ecological degradation. In "Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature", Greta Gaard says, "eco-feminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. Its theoretical base is a sense of self most commonly expressed by women and various other nondominant groups –a self that is interconnected with all life." (Gaard 1). In *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques*, Patrick Murphy states that "the development of an ecological feminism (ecofeminism) has begun [the] process of explicitly intertwining the terrains of female/male and nature/ humanity, which have been artificially separated by philosophical linearity for far too long" (7).

This paper approaches Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Prodigal Summer* through the framework of critical posthumanism and ecofeminism to analyse the synthesis of human and non-human suffering in the novels. Post humanism intersects human, non -human and technological worlds and has gained theoretical prominence in the wake of environmental consciousness and ecological campaigns that question the role of humans in shaping the fate of the earth. The humanist ideals of the autonomous, rational and sovereign individual are challenged by the posthumanist perspective, thereby accentuating the interconnectedness, entanglement, fluidity and co-evolution of the human and non-human forms of existence. Cary Wolfe in his book *What is Posthumanism?* (2010) rejects the notion of anthropocentrism and speciesism and exhorts readers to opt for "a new and more inclusive form of ethical pluralism" which encourages ethical treatment towards animals and the environment (137). Posthumanist perspective disintegrates natural binaries and hierarchal dualisms like man/woman, culture/ nature, human/non –human which are also responsible for repression and exploitation of women and nature. It compels human beings to rethink what it is to be a human, to be able to think and communicate. Sorina Higgins, commenting on Wolfe's ideas comments, "Wolfe's goal is not to undermine the existence or value of human beings. Rather, it is to call into question the universal ethics, assumed rationality, and species-specific selfdetermination of humanism" (n. pag.). Woolf feels that humans need to realise that they not just harbor prejudice and bias against other ethnic backgrounds but also against other species. Humans occupy a new place and have to exercise a new role in a world that is inhabited by non -human creatures.

Barbara Kingsolver is a Pulitzer prize winning American novelist who focuses on topics such as social justice, biodiversity, the interaction between humans and their communities and environments. Her fiction captures characters very often enduring inhospitable environments and focuses on the beauty found even in unseemly circumstances. Her narratives are deeply influenced by her childhood experiences and her studies of ecology and evolutionary biology. She breaks down

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patriarchal dualistic framework by interweaving human culture and nonhuman nature. Her works resonate with the ecofeminist thoughts of Karren Warre, Val Plumwood and Carolyn Merchant as she presents an essential connection between women, women and nature and human and nature in an attempt to exercise ecological consciousness to reinforce the connection. *Prodigal Summer* is her fifth novel which is heavily influenced by her childhood experiences in Appalachia. It narrates three intersecting stories, dealing with the interconnection between females and non-human animals and explores the serious consequences of an androcentric patriarchal setup that ill-treats women, land and nonhuman animals. In a radio interview with Noah Adams, Kingsolver said that the novel concerns “the biological exigencies of life on Earth[,]...about the human food chain, the connections between humans and our habitat” (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 116). Also on her website she states outrightly: “This novel is not exclusively – or even mainly – about humans. There is no main character. My agenda is to lure you into thinking about whole systems, not just individual parts. The story asks for a broader grasp of connections and interdependencies than is usual in our culture” (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 119).

The story is set in the Appalachian mountains in the Kentucky-Virginia-West Virginia area (Zebulon Mountain) with the farming community of Zebulon Valley/County in the valley below. Garnett Walker III says that his grandfather named Zebulon Mountain “modestly choosing Zebulon from the Bible, even though some still call it Walker’s Mountain” (82), so the name in Kingsolver’s novel originates from the Hebrew term ‘Zebulun’. According to recent scholarship, the name is derived from the trilateral root ZBL, common in 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE Ugaritic texts which was also used as an epithet to god Baal who was offered crop and animal sacrifices to please him. Baal connotes “lord”, a term commonly applied to “husband” who is assumed to be the lord of the house, wife and property. The narrative captures the lives of three women Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie having an introverted and solitary existence in the lap of nature. They share a sense of belongingness and possess strong views for their natural surroundings. Over the course of a “Prodigal Summer” their peace and solitude is corrupted by the arrival of external forces and they realise that they like other non-human creatures are not alone. These women characters realise that they are part of the bio-centric web that connects all living beings together, a view possessed by ecologists and eco-feminists. Deanna Wolfe is a wildlife biologist who is leading a reclusive life as a Forest Service employee and serving as a resident ranger overseeing a section of the Zebulon National Forest. Her job is to track a coyote, an endangered species whose absence in wildlife can drastically change the ecosystem. She has a passion for this species and chose it as subject for her graduate school thesis. Worried about the harmful effects of species extinction, she observes, “Plenty of people had watched and recorded the disaster of eliminating a predator from a system” (*Prodigal Summer* 63). Bio-centrists believe that all living beings are interconnected and interdependent and any kind of ecological disharmony can disrupt biological diversity on the planet. All species possess inherent value and man is in no way ethically or morally superior. In “Darwin and Ecology in Novels by Jack London and Barbara Kingsolver,” Bert Bender argues that *Prodigal Summer* is a “novel that celebrates and explores Darwin’s great theme of the reproductive force in evolutionary biology, [and] it is also a meditation on his inseparable, fundamental ecological insight – that ‘all organic beings’ ‘are bound together by a web of complex relations’” (125) Hence, in the novel, coyote connects and joins the human and non-human world, thereby achieving ecological harmony.

Deanne doesn’t need a man until the arrival of Eddie, the son of a sheep farmer from Wyoming who considers hunting Coyotes his “religion” (*Prodigal Summer* 323). Deanne gives in to the animal passion between them as she is conflicted between her body and her mind. She soon realises that she is pregnant and as fall arrives, Eddie leaves with an obscure note. Deanne is left alone to raise the child and she is forced to seek Nannie’s help to raise the child. According to Dilia Narduzzi, “Deanna Wolfe is figured as the human representation of the alpha female coyote”. She states that she can be compared to the alpha female coyote as both are strong predators who can take care of their need. Narduzzi observed that the male coyote “impregnates the alpha female coyote and then leaves her to her sister’s

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care, the beta female, to raise the pups. A link can be made between Eddie – the man who impregnates Deanna – and the male coyote. After sexual intercourse, both leave”. (Dilia Narduzzi 75). Hence both Deanna and the coyote are subject to oppression and subjugation by their male counterparts. This associated interconnects them to the web of life where all natural creatures are connected to each other and share each other’s experiences. According to Suzanne Jones in “The Southern Family Farm as Endangered Species: Possibilities for Survival in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*,” “Kingsolver clearly shows throughout the novel that not understanding the interconnections between the natural and the human world damages the ecosystem, as Nannie’s argument with Garnett about broad-spectrum insecticides and Deanna’s argument with western bounty hunter Eddie Bondo about coyotes demonstrate” (88). The novel doesn’t deal with a clash of ideologies but instead captures the voice of nature and man’s selfish attempt to interfere with it. Ecocriticism focuses on the interaction between human and the non-human world where animals occupy a central position in ecology. Bookchin maintains that human beings have a second nature (culture) which “gives them not only the right but the duty to alter, shape and control first nature (the nonhuman world)” (Manes 23). However in spite of the interconnectedness and interrelations, human beings do not possess the right to treat nature as per their whims and do whatever they desire with the ecological world. Natural creatures and animals are indispensable part of ecological vision and human laws and nature advocates are required to communicate and defend their rights.

Lusa Landowski is an entomologist turned farmer who struggles to keep her husband’s family farm afloat after his death. She has undergone a drastic transformation from a city girl to a farmer who has grown to love the wilderness of the land. She is an independent and resilient woman, embracing the natural surroundings and emerging as an assertive character in spite of the dominating attitude of the male characters around her. She harbours a unique sense of affinity with her natural surroundings and her love for moths and insects helps her turn into a protector and custodian of nature. She revolts against cutting of trees and says “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” (*Prodigal Summer* 123). She is strongly aware of her ecological surroundings and blends in it. Her affinity with her farm is so intense that she turns to her Palestinian and Jewish heritage for business ideas to gather capital for the farm, rearing goats for festivals organically. Kingsolver underlines the idea that humans are required to understand their role within the greater web of life as all are inseparable parts of nature which is also explained to Cole by Lusa: “You’re nature. I’m nature. We shit, we piss, we have babies, we make messes” (45). And yet humans are powerful and have a greater responsibility towards nature as they are capable of reflecting, regretting mistakes, and changing behaviour. Lusa emphasises the role of native and non-native species in maintaining a balance in the biotic pyramid while ensuring the presence of both. Her views on the invasive species like the non-native honeysuckle change during the course of the narrative as she realises that these species lead to the degradation of the ecosystem by reducing the energy sources of other creatures in the ecological pyramid. She refuses to practice conventional farming and introduces alternative farming project, thereby proving to the community that human beings can earn their livelihood by living in harmony with their surroundings. She denies planting tobacco on her farm. When her sister-in-law Jewel suggest that she can get the property logged for timber, she refuses and says, “I couldn’t log this hollow” (122). She continues emphatically, “I will not cut those trees down. 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...[t]he trees, the moths. The foxes, all the wild things that live up there” (123). She has deep concern for the ecological pyramid and explains to Crys the importance of forests to the entire food chain. When Crys asks, “Who needs trees?” Lusa replies, “About nineteen million bugs, for starters.” (353). Crys, continuing the argument asks, “Who needs nineteen million bugs? ‘Nineteen thousand birds that eat them.’ ‘So? Who needs birds?’ ‘I do. You do.” (353-354). Ecological balance actualizes the survival of all organisms by achieving a dynamic equilibrium where ecosystem diversity

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remains reasonably stable. Deanne and Lusa are united by their love for ecology and consider it their responsibility to ensure the protection of the predators and natural creatures. They play an integral role in preserving the eco-system and maintaining balance in the ecological pyramid. At the same time they also promote environmental values in their community.

Another custodian of nature is the environmentalist Nannie Rawley. She is nearly as old as her neighbour Garnett Walker and criticises his usage of pesticides and herbicides to revive and protect the American Chestnuts. She plays her part as a protector of nature and sustains natural creatures as she practices organic farming to cultivate apples in her orchard which she has inherited from her family. Nannie and Garnett are constantly at loggerheads over pesticide use on trees bordering their land, and exchange a series of letters arguing about man's role in the natural world. Garnett asserts that God gave man dominion over all other creatures, while Nannie favours a more evolutionary viewpoint and believes all of nature is intrinsically linked. She counters Garnett's interpretation of Genesis chapter 1 that humans are keepers of God's creation by stating that the Bible also instructs that gluttony is a sin and God has instructed man not to resort to killing which also includes killing non-human creatures. However, in spite of their ideological differences, Garnett finds himself increasingly attracted to and concerned for Nannie, and the two take care of each other's well-being. Nannie is a care giver, a representative of mother Earth who is affectionate towards all creatures and has the same affection towards the saplings and trees as a mother has towards her own children. Deanne recalls the life lessons she has received from her. Nannie is a naturalist who values everything that nature has to offer even her child who has Down syndrome. She embraces and honours the creation of sex, whether it is her own illegitimate child or Deanne's unborn child. She is not concerned about the father of Deanne's child and when Garnett asks about the father of the child she replies, "I don't care if the daddy's a mountain lion, I'm going to have a grand baby!" (425). She is a saviour of the biotic pyramid who rescues salamanders from Garnett's shop as they are becoming extinct in the Zebulon county. When Garnett questions her, she takes a posthumanist stand and reflects on the interrelated web of life, thereby decentralizing humans.

I do believe humankind holds a special place in the world. It's the same place held by a mockingbird, in his opinion, and a salamander in whatever he has that resembles a mind of his own.

Every creature alive believes this: The center of everything is *me*....To [the salamander], a man's a shadowy nuisance (if anything) compared to the sacred business of finding food and a mate and making progeny to rule the mud for all times. To themselves and one another, those muddly little salamander lives mean everything. (215)

The final chapter of the novel shares similarity with the beginning thereby connoting that the circle of life has come full circle and every creature and aspect is interconnected. Deanne and the coyote are indissolubly connected and share the similar identity. In the opening passage, Deanna can be seen tracking a coyote:

If someone in the forest had been watching her – a man with a gun, for instance, hiding inside a copse of leafy beech trees – he would have noticed how quickly she moved up the path and how direly she scowled at the ground ahead of her feet. He would have judged her an angry woman on the trail of something hateful. (1)

The final chapter written from the coyote's point of view shares the same description.

If someone in the forest had been watching her – a man with a gun, for instance, hiding inside a copse of leafy beech trees – he would have noticed how quickly she moved up the path, attending the ground ahead of her feet, so preoccupied with her solitary search that she appeared unaware of his presence. (443-444)

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Deanne shares affinity with the coyote, their fate is inextricably linked. The great ecological pyramid suggests relationship between different living organisms at different trophic levels in an ecosystem. Deanne's welfare lies in the return of the coyote to Zebulon National Park which will eventually revive the balance of the ecosystem of the Zebulon Mountain area, thereby suggesting the interdependence of the great ecological pyramid and reaffirmation of ecological consciousness. According to Deanne the complex biosystem of the earth will eventually become unstable if the ecological pyramid is out of balance. Deanne is desirous of maintaining balance in the ecosystem by restoring the ecology of the Zebulon mountains. She talks about her love for the coyotes and says "[t]hey're the top of the food chain...[and] [i]f they're good, then their prey is good, and its food is good. If not, then something's missing from the chain" (10-11)

Hence, Kingsolver's women characters critique and destabilize the exploitative patriarchal ideology, decentralize human beings and thereby suggest that man is no longer the center of the universe. They prove that man is merely a citizen of a universe where he is required to dwell with the non-human world in peace and tranquillity. Kingsolver emphasises the intersectionality of all living creature and highlights the worth and importance of each living being in maintaining balance in the ecological pyramid. *Prodigal Summer* demonstrates the role of female education in the liberation and sustenance of not only women characters but also the ecology. The characters Deanne, Luca and Nannie establish the idea that human beings are capable of living in harmony with the ecosystem in a way that minimizes disruption to the natural milieu if they are educated about the environment. Toxic systems can be destroyed by humans with small initiatives taken within the microcosms of their own lives. Development of responsible environmental ethics within communities can go a long way in creating a sustainable environment and a balanced atmosphere for the functioning of natural ecosystems

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