

Environmental advocacy in Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*

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Abstract

The consumer attitude of mankind is the primary cause of most anti-environmental behaviours that lead to nature degradation. This paper offers a close reading of Barbara Kingsolver's famous novel *Animal Dreams* analyzing the extent to which the novel advocates the need for environmental conservation. Kingsolver effectively portrays how an historically important town struggles against a politically powerful bureaucratic corporation and how its people finally succeed in saving the town from pollution that results from mining. The author makes it clear that the pile of dead tailings from the mining industry would soon destroy the living trees and lives of the people of Grace. She creates awareness of the urgency to retrieve the health of the earth by making the readers to contemplate on the unpleasant consequences of industrialization.

Keywords: Ecoconsciousness, copper mine, pollution, poisoned water, deforestation, environmental conservation, *Animal Dreams*

Introduction

Environmental concerns loom large in a world threatened by eco disasters. The clarion call to conserve the environment reverberates all around. Yet calls go unnoticed and caution to conserve what remains fall on deaf ears. It's high time to act and not to sit and bemoan the loss. Man, the so called "crown of all creations" must impede further ecological deterioration and take effective steps to conserve nature. He cannot point fingers at the environmental activists and wash his hands clean of the eco mess. Every Tom, Dick and Harry have a role to play, for if we aren't part of a solution, then it means we are the part of a problem. Literature, so far representing social problems has swerved its spot light on ecological issues to kindle environmental consciousness. Literary writers are making an honest endeavor to redefine their roles and are taking concerted efforts to rise to the occasion. Kingsolver comes in this line of committed authors using her fiction to raise consciousness and encourage people to notice how things are in the world. She not only raises awareness of chosen issues but also appeals to a broad readership through empathetic characters. She believes that fiction has the capacity to infuse an idea which in turn becomes integrated into the readers thoughts and values, and over time, into possible action. She cites the maxim, "Literature should inform as well as enlighten".

Codi's delight and dismay

The novel begins with the protagonist Codi visiting her hometown of Grace, Arizona after many years of absence. Her heart brims with excitement at the beauty of the valley's enthralling greenery. The whole valley rings with the call of birds and peacocks and the ruffle of the sparrows. But then the author points to the head of the canyon where the brick smoke stack of old "black mountain copper mine" overlooks the valley. The canopy of trees and the densely planted pecan orchard against the towering copper mine's smokestack forebodes an imminent catastrophe.

As Codi takes a walk along the orchards with John Tucker, her friend's husband, she is surprised to see the ground covered

with tiny immature nuts. To her question "So what is happening with these orchards", John's reply "Fruit drop" seems to signify an alarming environmental situation. Codi comes to know that the sulphuric acid from the mine let into the town's river has resulted in Arizona turning into a "poison ground" (63). The talk among the town's elders which centers on the ecological side effects of the leaching operations by the mining company also makes the readers understand that the situation is grim. Kingsolver criticizes the materialistic attitude of the mine owners who "would not stop the leaching operations on account of the pecan trees" (64)

Codi geared up for action

A teacher of Biology, Codi employs her scientific and literary skills to educate her high school classes about their environment. She collects samples of the river water and examines them expecting to witness the teeming microscopic world of a river. On the contrary, a strange panic strikes her when she sees no microorganisms under powerful magnification.

She exclaims in disbelief, "Our water is dead" and wonders, "what the hell is going on with this river" (110). The pH level of the river water shocks Codi as it was "higher than battery acid" (110). She finds it hard to believe that the poisoning that resulted from mining had gone this far leading to the "biotic death" of the river. The mining company in Grace has polluted the river that had been the life blood of the town for centuries. It is worth recalling Abbey's

(1968: 202) significant statement that "when a man must be afraid to drink freely from his countries rivers and streams that country is not fit to live in". The wealthy capitalists must realize that their action endangered both nature and fellow human being. It is indispensable to "Care for the earth because. Animals, plants, and entire ecosystems are valuable for their own sake" (Bouma- Prediger 2010: 165)

The Black mountain's proposal to dam the river is a case of further concern. The mining authorities have long back bought the water rights from the native villagers who thought they

“were getting money for nothing” (111). Codi’s response to the damming proposal reveals her anguish. “But then there would be no water for the orchards. That would be worse than the way it is now” (111).

The valley of Arizona gradually succumbs to the ecological assault of its greenery. Codi describes settlements “torn up when Black Mountain [fictional mining company] chased a vein of copper,” and claims that “not even the graveyards were sacred” (161) Apart from fruit drop big trees stop yielding fruits. John considers cutting the trees for firewood, “They are sixty years old. They don’t produce worth a damn anymore. I could cut them down.”(103).

The salty irrigation water from the mine’s leaching operation is turning the soil crushed and unfit for cultivation in addition to making the trees unproductive.

Yet, quite a distance away from the mining operations, Codi notices that the landscape looks evergreen in contrast to Arizona’s dry brown landscape. The meadows “were solidly carpeted in yellow flowers, punctuated by tall white poppies with silver leaves and tissue paper petals... the Southern slopes of the mountain sides were dappled with yellow !” (126). The comparison of a farther place gives a vivid picture of the ecological damage caused by the leaching process.

Codi’s water project with her biology pupils reveals the enormity of pollution which affects the whole valley and which later results in a community campaign. In the Science lab, when Codi hears the frogs clicking against the sides of their terrarium, she fears the imminent disappearance of this creature from the river. “This time next year, there would not even be fish or frogs in the river; these particular representatives of the animal kingdom were headed for extinction” (148). The Black mountain has been running sulfuric acid, a clear corrosive water miscible acid through their tailing piles to recover extra copper. The copper and sulphate combination known as „blue vitriol“ is a dangerous chemical which people used to kill rats and pond algae. Arizona’s River has become poisonous and polluted as a result of high quantities of sulphuric acid let into it. When the Black Mountain is warned by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) about the threat to the land and its people on account of its leaching, the mining company plans to build a dam to run the river away from the town.

Codi’s statement about the extent of pollution at the town council meeting, shocks the members, “But your trees knew all this way before we did. Watering them from the river is just like acid rain falling on them... The acid rain problem here in the West comes mostly from mine smelters. It’s the same acid one way or the other. Sulphuric acid” (176). One must consider nature as alive, treat it accordingly and understand that it is important to do so: otherwise, as Mc Kibben says, “The sacrifices demanded may be on a scale we cannot imagine and won’t like” (as quoted in Dana Phillips, 1996: 219).

Her profession as a teacher makes her feel the pinch of abusing nature; she reacts sensitively to her students’ indifference. She screams at their ignorance to the fact that “Black mountain was poisoning their mother’s milk and all they cared about was sex and a passing grade” (253). She educates them about the need for rain forests, the need for oxygen in the biosphere and how everything is connected. Her knowledge of science and her righteous anger against pollution represent her view that environmental pollution

signals the dangerous lack of knowledge or ability to think about the future. These concerns emerge as Codi rants at her biology class;

“If I can’t teach you something you’ll remember, then I haven’t even been here this year...You kids think this pollution shit is not your problem, right? Somebody will clean up the mess. It’s not your fault... Well, your attitude stinks. You are as guilty as anybody” (254).

The author uses Codi as her mouthpiece for substantiating her views on the necessity of environmental protection. Codi surprises the class when she tells her students how stone – washed jeans are made. Observing that half the kids in the class are wearing stone washed jeans, she explains the way nature is abused to make those jeans. It quite shocks the readers as well to know that the jeans are washed in a big machine with a special kind of gravel mined out of beautiful mountains. She calls those mountains “.....fragile like a big pile of sugar” (254), suggesting that nature is vulnerable to human greed and man is recklessly looting nature’s resources thereby upsetting the ecological balance. Such recklessness, the author warns is highly disastrous. Much harm is done to nature when the bulldozers and chainsaws cut down the trees and rip the mountainside to get the gravel for stonewashing jeans. A whole mountain range is plundered for commercial gains, yet man remains indifferent to nature’s smothered cry of anguish. To quote Thoreau (1992: 131), “By avarice and selfishness, and a groveling habit, from which none of us if free of regarding the soil as property.....the landscape is deformed”.

Codi does her best to champion nature’s cause. When the kids respond saying “Trees grow back” she replies, “Sure. Trees grow back, even a whole rain forest could grow back, in a couple of hundred years may be. But who’s going to make it happen? If you had to pay the real price for those jeans the cost and the time of bringing that mountain back to life instead of leaving it dead- Those pretty jeans would have cost you a hundred dollars” (255).

By her passionate heart to heart talk with her students, she makes them see things in the right perspective. She goads them further to think and respond to yet another instance of nature abuse,

“Think about the gas you put in a car. The real cost, not just pumping it out of the ground and refining it, but also cleaning up the oil spills and all the junk that goes into the air when it gets burnt. That’s part of what it costs, but you’re not paying it....but soon the bill comes due, and we pay it or we eat dirt” (255).

Through Codi’s role as a teacher, Kingsolver makes her readers realize what goes behind the making of luxury products helps the class to see nature destruction on a larger perspective. Codi connects the facts to their consciousness and makes them feel serious about it.

“If Grace gets poisoned, if all these trees die and this land goes to hell, you’ll just go somewhere else, right ?... the wilderness is used up....People can forget and forget and forget but the land has a memory. The lakes and the rivers are still hanging on to the DDT and every other insult we ever gave them....The fish have cancer. The ocean is getting used up” (255).

Codi equates the environment of Grace with rootedness and secure identity. This sense of belonging and identification with the environment appeals to readers in an increasingly

urbanized and migratory world. It is this affinity to nature that connects Codi to Grace and its people.

While talking to her class Codi gives simple analogy to drive home the fact that the ozone layer damage is disastrous. She relates how just like the way a smelter protects his body from a thousand degree hot metal by wearing coveralls and a big shield over his face, the earth protects itself from the sun's harmful rays by the atmosphere's ozone layer. Codi remarks, "the ozone layer is a big face shield in the sky....And it's slipping away from us. There's a big hole in it over the South Pole. When you use a spray you can make the hole bigger" (256).

Again Codi serves as the author's mouthpiece in voicing her fear of nature's imminent destruction if man interferes in its mechanism. Her position as a teacher facilitates reaching out to her students who quite understand her point though show resistance in the beginning. She further enlightens them about how the extraction of petroleum and the pumping and refining process that follow leads to oil spills and oil pollution. She calls attention to the fact that "The damn air is getting used up" (255).

The mining operation upsets nature's order. The soil loses its fertility, the water loses its properties and hence there is fruit fall and loss of river species. The absence of the whole world of microscopic things living in the river signifies that the river has become dead. The river whose source is the melting down of snow from the Apache reservation could have a rebirth only if the town people could stop Black Mountain from running the acid through the tailing piles. It is left to the townspeople to figure out how to get the company stop building the dam and stop polluting the river. During Codi's visit to Pueblo with her boyfriend Loyd, she expresses surprise coming across a fertile landscape of peach trees and three hundred years old Pecan orchards. "So how come this canyon's stayed productive for a thousand and some odd years, and we can't even live in Grace for one century without solving it up" (215). This is proof enough for Grace and its greenery suffering loss and destruction while places situated far from the mine flourish and prosper.

Women-Nature's champions

The female characters play a significant role in saving the town from the poisoned water while the old men merely discuss the pollution of Grace's orchards by the mine's leaching operation. Together with a group of local women, Codi helps Grace fight the pollution of its water. The male characters are resigned to the mining companies' pollution of their orchards, believing that "the trees can die and we can just go somewhere else, and as long as we fry up the bacon for them in the same old pan...it would be home" (179). It is the women who are left to coordinate the protest against environmental damage.

Codi also garners media attention for the town's polluted river by trading on Grace's idealized origin story and handmade crafts, commodifying the town's culture in order to save it from extinction. She presents an oral history rich in personal detail and grounded in the local environment. Mr. Ride Heart who pays a visit to Grace as the guest speaker confesses that he had never known of a place quite like Grace and expresses his wish that it should be declared as a historic preserve saying "Your trees are also historic" (277). His compliments make the readers realize the town's historic importance which presently

is on the verge of destruction. It is worthwhile to remember Wilson's (2002:145) view that "The glory of the primeval world is still there to protect and answer".

Kingsolver aligns this privileging of historical fact over nostalgia through characters like Codi, whose awareness of environmental interrelatedness is posited as essential to the survival of the town of Grace. Codi realizes that community members cannot continue being

"Amnesiacs, proceeding as if there were no other day but today" (240-241). It is a statement which emphasizes the direct association Kingsolver makes between awareness of the past and future environmental survival.

Conclusion

The events of *Animal Dreams* suggest that activism can be effective, with Codi achieving both political justice (the mine's leaching operation is stopped) and a personal sense of belonging (she decides to make her home in Grace). Kingsolver emphasises on nature as the source of everything from invention to a human sense of belonging, in such a way as to encourage the readers' sense of interrelatedness with the environment.

Thus, *Animal Dreams* is a cautionary tale. Barbara Kingsolver truly champions nature's cause and her novel strongly advocates the need to preserve nature's bounty before it is too late. Man's thoughtlessness in provoking ecological situations that are potentially dangerous originates partly from the fact that he has not yet learned to live within the constraints of his spaceship earth. He is oblivious to the fact that his happiness depends on the rational use of its resources and the improvement of the environment. Let him not forget that creating a desirable future demands more than foresight; it requires vision.

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