

Reconceiving Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* from an Ecocritical Perspective

E. Rajalakshmi & Shanthi K. Clement

Abstract

Toxicity and contamination have been a major threat to people living in the current century. This paper intends to critically analyze Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* in connection with Lawrence Buell's *Toxic Discourse*. Toxic discourse in fiction demonstrates the writers' concern on environmental degradation with empathetic plots. Barbara Kingsolver is one among the few American writers who explores and presents ecocentric views in an intelligible manner through her artistic acumen. She has created many enticing eco-conscious characters in her fictions. Kingsolver through her characters aims at transforming humankind into better beings promoting harmony between humans and nature. *Animal Dreams* being a narrative, which focuses on sisters' (Codi and Hallie) love and their love for nature, transforms into an eco-narrative disseminating awareness on the resources of nature and their preservation. Codi's unflinching fight towards preserving the river from pollution is a manifestation of her commitment towards mother earth. A conceptual analysis of the novel aids in understanding Kingsolver's text from an ecocentric perspective. This paper by stressing upon the need for a strict land ethic creates an awareness among individuals to be responsible beings.

Keywords : Corporate greed; Ecological awareness; Ecosickness; Memory, nature; Toxic discourse.

Introduction

Anthropocentrism regards humans as the central entity with intrinsic value compared to other entities in the world. This self-centered perception has led to a paradigm shift in the last few centuries with the emergence of awareness towards nature and environment. Jeopardizing the resources of nature has put humankind in a state of endangerment. Ecocriticism as

an interdisciplinary movement started in the mid- 1980s of the twentieth century. It had its beginnings in U.S and Britain literary studies but has now spread worldwide. According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment (Introduction xviii). By bringing out eco consciousness in the practice of literary criticism, it aims in promoting ecological awareness. According to Garrard, "Ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology" (5). A myriad of books have been written since the movement began. With its expanding boundaries to include various voices around the world, ecocriticism has now evolved into a transdisciplinary field. However, as Hannes Bergthaller states in his article, "Having begun as an attempt to ground its ecological critique on the absolute value of that which lay "beyond" society, ecocriticism thus ended up turning towards eminently social questions and assimilating itself to well-established discourses of emancipation" (Hubert 107). At present, we live in a transitional period characterized by a sense of threat and uncertainty; hence the emergence of novels which deal with environmental crises, is the need of the hour to bring about a change in human's perception towards nature.

Reading Kingsolver coupled with the theory of ecocriticism, especially toxic discourse, opens new avenues of perception in interpreting the text from the perception of nature. Barbara Kingsolver, a renowned contemporary American novelist has dealt with many ecocentric issues in her works. Notably in most of her fictions, she envisions community in connection with the environment from an optimistic perspective. On analyzing the fictions of Kingsolver, one is inclined to believe that by striking a balance between characters and the community one can preserve and protect ecology from environmental crises. Similarly, Magali Cornier Michael through her research has discovered that books authored by American women at the turn of twentieth -first century have offered "the most innovative and most constructive revisions of the concepts of community, coalition, Subjectivity, and agency" (3). It is indeed clear that Kingsolver's novels as a work of literature address its readers with various facets of information. In addition to engaging and entertaining narratives, Kingsolver imbues her readers the sense of commitment and responsibility towards the real world (nature).

In relation to the key aspect discussed in the paper it is observed that *Animal Dreams* is a fictionalized version of Kingsolver's non-fiction *Hold-ing the line: Women in Great Arizona mine strike of 1983* were women from Clifton, Morenci and Ajo oppose the Phelps- Dodge- Copper Corporation

as a community. Even Though, *Animal Dreams* is a fiction, it has traces of hidden truth which can be apprehended to its fullest knowledge when it is read in comparison with the above-mentioned non-fiction. It is argued that discourses on toxicity apart from acknowledging ecological crisis aims at bringing to awareness the key ecological problem, whether we can find ways of "living rich, complex, creative, non-repetitive lives without social injustice and without environmental collapse" (Hubert 160). It is found that *Animal Dreams* has been seldom interpreted and analyzed from the perception of toxic discourse, taking into consideration the rhetoric of the fiction.

Toxic Discourse in the Context of American Fiction

In an anxiously industrializing world, the fear of being exposed to toxins has left human to rethink on their duties towards land ethic. Eco-conscious American novelists have been reiterating through various forms their concern towards nature to make people aware of the alarming situation on the global environmental crisis. Heather Houser states that writers in contemporary American fiction have been concentrating on the ill effects of usage of chemicals as they cause serious health hazard not only to the public but also to other biotic systems in nature. Houser calls such writings as "Eco Sickness", where toxicity caused by industrialization has put the society at risk. Characters in eco sickness fiction are coconstitutive as it traces the linkage between human body and environment by dissolving the preconceived notions of environment. Similarly, Lawrence Buell, a well-known American ecocritic defines the forms, origin, uses, and critical implications of toxic rhetoric in his book *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Buell states that the impetus of toxic discourse is to "reinforce the deromanticization and to urge the expansion of "nature" as an operative category" (45).

The two well-known works in the U.S Environmental history which has the framework of toxic discourse and has influenced a myriad of eco sickness writers are Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Gibbs' *Love Canal* (1982). Rachel Carson's landmark text *Silent Spring* details the injurious effects of chemicals DDT on plant, animal, and human life. Gibb's *Love Canal* elaborates on a similar issue where the landscape is being polluted by toxic dump by big companies. These two main incidents triggered a powerful new environmental health movement. The aim of the movement is to take public health into consideration as a major priority combined with the desire for justice and human rights. By having the two main books as an aid, it is analyzed that almost in all instances "the hypotheses

made by local people have later been confirmed by professionals" (Gibbs 8). However, after the emergence of the health movement the U.S. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) did research and found that there were still "30,000 other potential Love Canals" (Gibbs 12). As this being a major concern in America, Kingsolver has fictionalized a similar issue in *Animal Dreams* to prick peoples' consciousness towards the environment to rethink their attitude towards planet earth.

That aside, it can be noted that with time, narratives in texts have shifted from preservationism in the Thoreau-Muir tradition to environmental justice activism. Buell states that contemporary toxic discourse retells "narratives of rude awakening from simple pastoral to complex" by linking pastoral values to Eco populism. Whatever the mode of activism might be, they (preservationism and Eco populism) share a common conviction that the "biological environment ought to be more pristine than it is, ought to be a healthy, soul-nurturing habitat." (38). Buell explicates four recurring themes in a literary text which has toxic discourse. (i) the shock of awakened perception (ii) as propagated in Carson's *Silent Spring* "every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals, from the moment of conception until death" (iii) It mostly deals with industrial toxicology where community or group of people raise their voice against "a common enemy of corporate greed." It resembles the "moral passion cast in a David versus Goliath scenario (iv) the technique of narration where the incidents of toxic risk discussed "montages into gothic".

Evidently, Cynthia Deitering has identified that writers' concern towards chemical contamination has become a novelistic preoccupation in the mid-1980s. She justifies by pointing out that ". . . toxic waste seems to function in recent fiction both as cultural metaphor for a society's most general fears about its collective future and as expression of an ontological rupture in its perception of the Real" (Cynthia 197). Perhaps, Kingsolver in *Animal Dreams* has not limited herself to depicting only the toxic scenario. She imagines a solution with the hope that things might change for the better in future. Taking into account this aspect of Kingsolver's writing, the novel can be studied in analogy to what Beck refers to as 'reflexive modernity', which means "a modernity which is compelled to respond to the forces of modernization, to the 'unforeseen consequences' or 'side-effects' of the scientific and technological successes of an earlier, industrial modernity" (Hubert 497).

By focusing on toxic consciousness, this article exemplifies *Animal Dreams* as a novel that emphasizes toxic discourse. Being set in an imaginary town

of Grace, Arizona, Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* explores the internal paralysis of Cosima Noline (nickname Codi). In the sequence of the novel, Codi recovers her memory by making a strong connection with the land to which she belongs. Kingsolver through Cosima accentuates the importance of an individual's duty in a community. By involving her characters in the environmental issues happening around them, Kingsolver restores a sense of wholeness and fulfillment in them. Despite living as hapless victims of exploitation, Kingsolver's protagonist speaks for themselves to defend their environment to restore the biological integrity and stability. As Buell states, "The deliberate pace and methodological rationalism of scientific and legal procedures run directly counter to the felt urgency of toxic discourse, leaving self-identified victims of environmental illness oscillating between implacable outrage and miserable uncertainty" (48,49). Women characters in the novel stage an anti toxics campaign to save the river of Grace from extinction.

Toxic Discourse as Metanarrative of Risk in *Animal Dreams*

Kingsolver in her novel, like Carson, contrasts the condition of land before and after chemical contamination. She depicts the land of Grace as a mining town with rich minerals. It is understood from the words of Codi that the land has been polluted in the recent past due to industrial waste as she remembers spending her childhood days in a wealthy and unpolluted land. For instance, Codi reminisces and shares, "Grace is made of things that erode slowly to be noticed: red granite canyon walls, orchards of sturdy old fruit trees past their prime, a shamelessly unpolluted sky (8). The land is known for its rich source of fruit production also. Additionally, she delineates on how the land is viewed from outside the town, it is fully covered by "orchards: pecan, plum, apple. The highway ran along the river dividing the orchards like a long, crooked part in a leafy scalp. The trees filled the whole valley floor to the sides of the canyon (9). Conversely, within a short span of her life, she could notice a change in climate and weather. With assertion, she shares that the climate has become hot, "Down in the desert, in Tucson, every day was in the hundred-and -teens and the TV weatherman were reporting the string of broken records almost proudly, like scores in a new sport.

In Grace no one kept track especially, but we suffered just the same" (104). Even though Grace doesn't receive much rain, the flow of water in the river will not dry. Codi states, "The river was Grace's memory of water" (276). This shows the changing environment in accordance with human being's exploitation. In another instance, Codi explicates on the conse-

quence of extreme climatic changes in Grace. She expresses her dismay regarding the trees in Grace, "Leaves and aborted fruits fell in thick, brittle handfuls like the hair of a cancer patient" (177). As Buell theoretically argues in "Toxic discourse", the characters in *Animal Dreams* practically undergo a shock of awakened perception. They become aware and conscious of their environment. This awakening has made them identify the problem for their suffering. To elaborate, toxicity produced by capitalist markets has the power to affect people all over the world despite being operational in a particular place. Subsequently, Codi's concern towards the changes she notices in Grace expresses "the peculiar displacement of a generation poised on the precipice of an epistemic rupture" (Deitering 200) of knowing the earth as home to biotic communities of various species and as toxic riskscape.

As the novel unfolds, it has been found that the river of Grace has been poisoned by sulfuric acid due the leaching operations carried out by Black Mountain Company. It is detrimental as the leftover chemicals have been poisoning the plants and trees near the riverbed. The river is the source of water for the plentiful orchards in Grace. Due to contamination the nuts from the trees fell off immature (fruit drop). Using the poisoned water with much salt content for irrigation, has resulted in the damage of half of the cropland in Grace. Codi expresses her angst by referring to the contaminated river water as 'acid rain'. She blames, "The acid-rain problem here in the west comes mostly from mine smelters. It's the same acid rain, one way or the other. Sulfuric acid" (181). The toxic risk had changed the fertile canyon into infertile by killing everything which grows in the soil. Codi points out, "The dead mountain range of tailings on the lip of the mine had sat for decades, washed by rain, and still was barren as the Sahara" (66).

People who have lived near the company have abandoned the area. Codi mentions it as a 'ghost town' where the only functioning building in that area is the hospital. The Gracela canyon has turned into a "poison ground" due to chemical contamination. Like the theoretical framework pointed out by Buell in "Toxic discourse", every character in the novel is exposed to the hazardous chemicals. The totalizing images of contamination expressed by Codi shows that a community of people living in Grace has been subjected to toxic risk. Besides being a mere narrator, Codi nudges the reader unconsciously to think about the current world. However, it makes it clear that "every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable" (Buell 11). A horrified realization of Grace's scenario has put Codi in a state of desperation. She

feels that one cannot undo what has been done to the land, as the memory of land is much stronger than a man's memory. To exemplify, Codi states, "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 (261).

Another instance which elaborates on this issue is where, Codi takes her students on a field trip to collect samples from the river. Based on the findings from the sample they tested Codi elaborates, "The pH . . . from some areas came in just a hair higher than battery acid. I couldn't believe the poisoning from the mine had gone this far. Protozoans are the early-warning system in the life of a river, like a canary in a mine. And this canary is dead" (112). Before subjecting the water to a laboratory test under microscope, Codi was expecting to see an infinite number of microscopic organisms teeming with life. On the contrary, she observes stillness in water where every microscopic organism was dead. This gave a strange sense of panic to Codi. To quote, Life, as cited by Oppermann in her essay, "materializes as a networked phenomenon linking the microscopic to the macrocosmic, bacteria to the biosphere, genes to globe" (Hubert 274). It is evident from the instance that if the chemical leftovers of the company have the potential to kill microorganisms in water, it would definitely cause health issues when consumed. Codi explains to her students that the mining company has put the lives of people at Grace in a great peril. With anxiousness she informs, by polluting the water, invariably the "Black Mountain was poisoning their mother's milk" (260). This puts the living and future generation at risk. Kingsolver acknowledges the hysteria of toxic anxiety in her work, to ensure that it stays on the public agenda.

Subsequently, it must be examined that nature has numerous ways of showing warning signs to remind humankind before everything collapses and ends in a natural catastrophe or Apocalypse. It is upto humankind to be receptive to these signs and mend their attitude towards nature. By citing Wheeler, Oppermann emphasizes, "all life consists of acts of communication and relatedness" (91). Likewise, it can be understood that species other than human are natural palimpsest inscribed with layers of embodied meanings. Since they have close association with nature, they have the capacity to showcase earlier signs of warning regarding ecological degradation when observed attentively.

However, Buell through his study has identified that contemporary novels that deal with toxic discourse inherits an ambiguous legacy. Unlike other scientific novels, novels dealing with toxic discourse "relies at every turn on scientific authority" (55). For instance, Codi contends,

Here is the chemistry of it. Black Mountain mining has been running sulfuric acid. Which is a clear, corrosive, water miscible acid through their tailing piles to recover extra copper. It combines to make copper sulphate, which is also known as 'blue vitriol,' people used to use it to kill rats and pond algae and about everything else you can name. there's a ton of it in your river. And there's straight sulfuric acid in there too. The EPA finally sent a report saying that kind of pollution is very dangerous and they can't put it near people and orchards, so the Black mountain is building a dam to run the river out of Tortoise Canyon. (180)

Buell's third major constituent of toxic discourse elaborates on the "moral passion cast in a David versus Goliath scenario" against corporate greed due to industrial toxicology. There is also another instance from the novel which can be categorized under this constituent. From Loyd, Codi finds out that the Jemez Mountains were also mined savagely for Pumice (odd Styrofoam like gravel), the material in need to manufacture denim jeans. The narrator criticizes entrepreneurs who exploit mountains for their personal gains. She expresses her opinion, "To people who think of themselves as God's houseguests, American enterprise must seem arrogant beyond belief. Or stupid. A nation of amnesiacs, proceeding as if there were no other day but today. Assuming the land could also forget what had been done to it" (248). Corporate giants for capitalistic gains find an escape route to protect themselves from being caught red handed. For example, in an interview with Malcolm Hunt, Dona Althea reveals about the cunning act initiated by the company, "They're actually damming the river to avoid paying fines to the Environmental Protection Agency, isn't that right? Because the river is so polluted with acid?" (272). She even goes further to criticize the members of the company as a "greedy bunch . . . and they got what they wanted from this canyon and now they have to squeeze it by the balls before they let it go." (ibid).

Heidegger disputes to defend nature by referring western cultural perception of nature and material objects as "standing reverse." According to the term "a tract of land was revealed and represented as a coal mining district, a mineral deposit; or a river was regarded and represented as a supplier of water power. . ." (Deitering 199). This perception has led to exploitation of resources and as a result we are left with toxic waste generated by processing the resources to satiate the consumerist and capitalistic needs. Subsequently, all these instances make it clear that imposing a strict land ethic to preserve the natural integrity is what this fast-paced century needs.

Codi along with members of Stitch and Bitch club organize an anti toxics campaign towards the company and wins the case by shutting down the company permanently. The effect of the campaign made the company owners to surrender. It is stated that the “vice-president of the Black Mountain Mining Company called a press conference in Phoenix to announce that after seventy years of productive and congenial relations with the people of Gracela Canyon, the mine operation there was closing up shop (320). Kingsolver, on contrary to the fourth constituent of toxic discourse discussed by Buell, doesn’t change her plot into a gothic scenario but creates a sense of hope for the readers. Buell in reference to toxic discourse elucidates on “environmental racism” in the U.S where sites of minority communities are targeted to build waste facilities and other bearers of toxification. Due to which one can notice an increased awakened toxic consciousness and green activism among nonprivileged. Kingsolver in her *Animal Dreams* elucidates on a similar situation where Grace, a small rural town is chosen as a site for exploitation. Likewise, Glotfelty in her essay, conceives “nimby” (acronym for ‘not in my backyard’) from a different perspective. The acronym as suggested by Glotfelty refers to local resistance to unwanted facilities and land uses. She cites Cronin and Kennedy to make her argument effective.

According to Cronin and Kennedy, nimbyism is a movement for environmental justice. They believe “it will play a vital role in the future, ‘citizen empowerment’ being ‘the best hope for preserving the world’s natural resources’” (213). Glotfelty concludes her essay expounding, “Even in a globalizing world with planetary problems, grassroots resistance to local threats remains an essential component of environmentalism and should be commended, not condemned” (213). This has been strikingly fictionalized by Kingsolver through her characters in *Animal Dreams* where members of Stitch and Bitch club who belong to a small rural town stage a protest with utmost resistance to achieve their goal. As identified by Yamashiro (44) in his essay, the environmental justice movement offers Buell a powerful lens for discussing “toxic discourse.” Codi seeks environmental justice for the misacts done to the river and succeeds in winning justice.

Women characters in Kingsolver’s novel strive to get rid of the Black Mountain Company from Grace because they all believe as Buell cites “a healthy environment is necessary for a healthy economy (34).” In an interview produced by The Kentucky Network, Barbara Kingsolver (306) puts forward a positive message telling “I want people to be hopeful, to think they can change the world.” *Animal Dreams* also convey the same message. Further, she expresses her concern that community life is greatly

missing in modern American life. For which, she has given life, in this novel. As Jonathan Bate suggests, "the dream of deep ecology will never be realized upon earth, but our survival as species may be dependent on our capacity to dream it in the work of our imagination" (38). Kingsolver, through Codi, has instilled a sense of hope in the minds of readers. She has deliberately portrayed community life in *Animal Dreams*, to bring out the significance of it in one's personal life and public life through Codi. The *bildungsroman* of the character Codi in *Animal Dreams* is phenomenal where Kingsolver has depicted every aspect of the character with excellent craftsmanship.

Conclusion

To sum up, from time immemorial, nature has helped man to understand his/her inner self in various ways. Human body unconsciously heeds to nature for its mental and spiritual well-being. Exploitation and toxifying of natural resources ultimately disturb this invisible connection which in turn collapses the process of human growth. Incorporating toxic discourse in fiction aids in understanding the seriousness of the environmental crisis in the current century. Toxic discourse in humanities differs from science, as science only presents the facts and reports whereas literature creates an empathetic connection with the characters. Toxic discourse helps in gaining a deeper understanding as it unmasks how ecology is interconnected with human health, economy, politics, and culture. Toxic discourse in ecocriticism plays a crucial role in contemporary ecocriticism as it makes people aware of their responsibility towards the environment. Codi holds an ample significance in the fiction as she reflects the contemporary environmental issue which is prevalent not only in Grace but throughout the world. Kingsolver offers both constructivist and naturalist approaches of conceptualizing 'nature.' Kingsolver through her protagonist Codi, on one hand by pointing out the environmental problems invites us to believe that humanity is part of nature. She urges humanity to 'reconnect' our links with it. On the other hand, she presents nature as a domain which is independent of us, but now ruined through human intrusion upon it and 'contamination' of it. She points out that this attitude may result in a tragic situation where humans will be victims consequently to what they have done to nature. It can be noticed that by widening the eco consciousness through her protagonist she infuses in readers a collective empowerment on the environmental crisis.

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