

## BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S VISION THROUGH HER NONFICTIONAL NARRATIVES OF LAND VIA HOME

*Ansul Rao, Research Scholar, Department Of English, Indira Gandhi University, Meerpur, Rewari, Haryana*

*Prof. Nikhilesh Yadav, Professor & Research Supervisor, Department of English, Indira Gandhi University, Meerpur, Rewari, Haryana*

### **Abstract:**

*Well-known American novelist Barbara Kingsolver has also published two essay collections. Ecological concerns remain uppermost in her works directly or indirectly. This paper aims to analyze Kingsolver's use of tropes of home and land in her essays in order to elucidate her ecological vision. In the interconnected web of life, the place of humans is not independent of the biological world in which they dwell and neither is human culture self-sustaining in the absence of the biota and the material world. Kingsolver examines our present ethical system, its historical roots, and makes an earnest appeal to re-evaluate our relationship with the nonhuman world. There is no dearth of facts to enlighten us about the ecological dangers that the present time is facing, yet there is a lack of awareness and commitment on behalf of the general public and policymakers. In such a scenario Kingsolver's invocation of images of the home gives an emotional push to the arguments backed by facts.*

**Keywords:** *Interconnected, Ecological, Home, Land, Nonhuman.*

Home is place, geography, and psyche; it's a matter of survival and safety, a condition of attachment and self-definition (*Small Wonder* 197).

As a novelist, Barbara Kingsolver has received critical acclaim as well as popular appeal. Her nonfiction has also been greatly admired. Among her nonfiction writings are two essay collections: *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never* published in 1995, and *Small Wonder: Essays* published in 2002. This paper examines Kingsolver's use of tropes of home and land to unpack her ecological vision. The home stands for shelter, safety, and a sense of belongingness. The Land is also home to its biotic and abiotic community as Aldo Leopold elaborates in "The Land Ethic." Kingsolver challenges the distinction between culture and nature that has led the former to destroy the latter. Her meticulous observations of the natural world make her writing alive with sensory details. She is often identified as Southern or Southwestern writer, and she takes forward the one characteristic which is associated with both these categories i.e. a strong attachment to the place which gives rise to bioregionalism. Her essays capture her personal moments and place these in conversation with the most pressing issues of our generation. As a result, not only do we see the social commentary but also the commentator. In the essay "Small Wonder" she tries to find ways to deal with the grief and anger experienced by her and fellow Americans in the aftermath of 9/11. She clings to the lessons taught by her parents to have faith in the land to provide solace and dares to draw attention to the flaws in the unsustainable lifestyles of a majority of American people fuelled by a consumerist culture.

Christine Cusick in her essay, "Remembering Our Ecological Place: Environmental Engagement in Kingsolver's Nonfiction," focuses on the role of memories and stories of the place in enhancing our understanding of the present environmental crises. Cusick proposes that "through her narrative engagement with memory, story, and place, Kingsolver offers an environmental ethic of bioregionalism,

ultimately suggesting that when humans begin to understand their place within an evolving biological context, their actions will move toward the sustenance of and care for their human and nonhuman communities" (214). This paper proposes that the literal and metaphorical image of home is central to Kingsolver's ecological vision and ethics. As the home is a landscape of memories, its image evokes a strong sense of familiarity and attachment. Kingsolver passionately advocates a shift in our ethos to arrest the ongoing environmental degradation. She moves from a restrictive conception of home to include the idea of the earth as home and all the living beings as equal residents. By pointing out the damage done to our natural home, her essays trigger a revision of the concept of home. Environmental educator Mitchell Thomashow in his book *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change* suggests that in order to make global environmental crisis more palpable we need to develop "a place-based perceptual ecology." This can be achieved by combining "natural history and local ecology, the life of the imagination, and spiritual deliberation" (5). Barbara Kingsolver's essays offer us this combination. Many of her essays throw light on her childhood spent in a small town in Kentucky. Her memories are filled with the time spent in the lap of the woods surrounding her home, a place abundant in the bounty of nature. This childhood shaped her lifelong love for nature.

The recurring motif of home makes the reader connect at an emotional level with the natural world, and thus, it becomes an effective literary strategy to spread her message of ecological awareness. In "Four Master Tropes" Kenneth Burke posited, "Metaphor is a device for seeing something *in terms of* something else" (421). Kingsolver expands the idea of dwelling from home to the earth. The focus on the similarities of attributes of home and land as a place of refuge and sustenance (material as well as spiritual) for all living beings engenders a new perspective toward our natural home.

Kingsolver's two home places, rural Kentucky and Tucson in Arizona, appear predominantly in her essays in *High Tide in Tucson*. The titular essay in this collection begins by describing the accidental transfer of a hermit crab from the Caribbean to her home in Tucson. Comparing the crab's displacement with her own deliberate relocation to Tucson, Kingsolver comments upon her culture which associates movement away from home as part of growth. The home that she left behind has shaped her identity, has given her a sense of rootedness and a lasting appreciation for the natural world. Though she has made her home in the desert now, she yearns for the home left behind. She declares her love for her adopted home, yet her intuitions are shaped by her attachment to the "original home." She constantly contrasts the topography of these two places. This sense of belonging to the land creates an emotional bond with the earth and inspires her to tread carefully. She writes: "No creek runs here, but I'm still listening to secret tides, living as if I belonged to an earlier place: not Kentucky, necessarily, but a welcoming earth and a human family. A forest. A species" ("High Tide" 7). From personal narratives the essay smoothly transits into a commentary upon human species' collective behavior which sullies our thinking and the world we live in. Buster, the crab, functions metonymically to denote the sway of evolution over all living beings. Buster's inexplicable behavior opens a window on the evolutionary truth that all species respond to internal impulses. What we need is to reclaim our animal nature and realize that we are an integral part of the natural world that sustains us. Evoking notions of past communities, Kingsolver calls us to revisit our ideas of "want" and "need," consequently this will enlighten us about our place in our natural home. While hiking in the Eagle Trail Mountains she comes across some relics of Hohokam people. Though they disappeared around A.D. 1450, their stories reach us by their domestic items. Their settlements were inspired by the land favorable for their survival. They had no need for any other religion than the faith inspired by the life supporting land. The story of Hohokam people again works as a metonymy explaining the essential correlations between human home and the land. The interconnectedness of our home and the land is astutely explained in the following lines:

It's starting to look as if the most shameful tradition of Western civilization is our need to deny we are animals. In just a few centuries of setting ourselves apart as landlords of the Garden of Eden, exempt from

the natural order and entitled to hold dominion, we have managed to behave like so-called animals anyway, and on top of it to wreck most of what took three billion years to assemble. Air, water, earth, and fire so much of our own element so vastly contaminated, we endanger our own future. Apparently we never owned the place after all. Like every other animal, we're locked into our niche: the mercury in the ocean, the pesticides on the soybean fields, all come home to our breastfed babies. In the silent spring we are learning it's easier to escape from a chain gang than a food chain. Possibly we will have the sense to begin a new century by renewing our membership in the Animal Kingdom ("High Tide" 10).

Thus, Kingsolver demands a re-evaluation of the term "human" itself. The culturally constructed "human" has become completely dissociated with the physical world necessary to maintain the animal "human." Kingsolver's point can be understood more clearly by the concept of "trans-corporeality" proposed by Stacy Alaimo in her book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. According to Alaimo, one way to understand trans-corporeality is as "material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world" (2). This constant flow of material between human and "more-than-human" is central in our relationship with the natural world. This awareness destroys the notion that our home (or culture by extension) is an isolated unit separate from the rest of the biosphere.

Trans-corporeal perception can give a better understanding of the ecological hazards. Kingsolver takes the bull of genetic modification of crops by its horn in "A Fist in the Eye of God" in *Small Wonder*. She provides strong instances of trans-corporeality in a world that can lose its survival insurance gained by evolution to the greed of few. She begins the essay by describing in detail a hummingbird making its nest in a tree outside her kitchen. The interrelatedness in the nature propels an almost religious awe, "The spectacular perfection of that nest, that tiny tongue, that beak calibrated perfectly to the length of the tubular red flowers from which she sucks nectar and takes away pollen to commit the essential act of copulation for the plant that feeds here every piece of this thing and all of it, my God" ("A Fist" 95). The description of the hummingbird's domestic preparation represents the influence of evolution and natural selection in any species' life story. She calls for attenuation of religion's interference in the teaching of science to children so as to enable them to understand the ecological changes happening around them. Her strong criticism of genetic modification of food crops stems from the understanding that nothing in nature is isolated. Acknowledging that in public discourses most of the objections to genetic modification of crops focus on human health hazards, she pin points larger dangers to our "habitats and food systems" encompassing the globe ("A Fist" 104). This essay weaves imaginative scenarios with scientific facts to correlate poor farmers of the developing countries, global agri-businesses, free-market policies, and butterflies and insects to create a picture of a world enmeshed together. This world is the only home that we have and we need to be aware of the consequences of our actions. As Thoreau proclaimed in *Walden*, "moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep," awareness is crucial. This is the main reason that Kingsolver passionately advocates teaching of evolutionary biology in schools, and favors a science that can coexist with ethics.

Buster, the crab, makes an appearance again in the last essay of this book, "Reprise," completing the circle of interconnectedness, and so does her faith in life that she expressed in the first essay. The structure of this collection becomes "internally synecdochic" (Burke 427) as the end includes the beginning. Here she discusses how she created a pond behind her house which gets filled during rain and within minutes becomes home to a variety of lives. The comingling image of home and land in this essay celebrates the miracle of life: "Everywhere you look, joyful noise is clanging to drown out quiet desperation. The choice is draw the blinds and shut it all out, or believe" ("Reprise" 267).

The second essay in this book, "Creation Stories", celebrates the cultural diversity that Tucson offers. "Existence is always coexistence," writes Timothy Morton in his book *The Ecological Thought* (4). The idea of coexistence is expressed in Kingsolver's spiritual musings on different types of creation myths that she encounters among the residents of Tucson on her way to the post-office. The stories come from

culturally diverse human beings as well as from the desert animals and the river. Each story is equally important; homes and land telling their stories. This “coexistence” becomes a complicated relationship in the next essay, “Making Peace.” This essay chronicles Kingsolver's movement from downtown Tucson to the edge of the city in desert. Using home as a symbol for human and land for nonhuman, this essay depicts the tension between the two. Her descriptions evoke the history of land conquest in America: “Like a pioneer claiming her little plot of prairie, I immediately planted a kitchen garden and hollyhocks outside the door. I inhaled silence, ecstatic with the prospect of owning a place that was really my own: rugged terrain, green with mesquite woods and rich in wildlife” (“Making Peace” 24). But her conquest is short lived as her garden is eaten and trampled by pigs and other creatures. As she struggles to save her kitchen garden and flowers from the wild creatures, she reflects upon the notions of territory and possession. The battle of wits between the author and the pigs is one of the finest examples of Kingsolver's ability to evoke humor. When every trick fails, the realization comes, “ownership is an entirely human construct” (“Making Peace” 26). The origin of this concept of “ownership” is traced as the root cause of man's disconnecting with the natural world. The rise of the abstract religion that preaches of dominion over all other living creatures, symbolized by the image of “God the Father” grew along with the image of “Man the Owner of the Flock” (“Making Peace” 30). This abstraction has made us blind to the value of things that can never be owned. Forgoing the human notion of ownership of land can lead to spiritual experience of sharing our lives with countless other creatures.

The tension between the home and land becomes acute in some cases and leads to drastic loss of many unique species. “Infernal Paradise” presents such a case. This essay records Kingsolver's visit to Haleakala Crater in Hawaii Islands. Recounting the natural history of Hawaii, Kingsolver narrates the epic struggle of the native flora and fauna against the invasion of human culture on these islands. The very idea of home as a human construct comes under attack: “The human passion to carry all things everywhere, so that every place is home, is well on its way to homogenizing our planet. The casualties are the species trampled and lost, extinguished forever, at the rate of tens of thousands per year” (“Infernal Paradise” 204). Here, it is a race against time to preserve what little is left of once a lively land. The endemic birds like nēnē goose and plants like silver sword are representations of land getting damaged in our attempt to create a home according to the preconceived notions. These species, having evolved in a unique habitat, became highly vulnerable on their home turf which was getting altered by man induced changes. These invasions came in the shape of rats, pigs and humans themselves. The story of the damage done to nēnē geese and silver sword plants is heart-wrenching: “Unlike the spiny inhabitants of other deserts, the arid-adapted silver swords evolved without the danger of being eaten. Defenseless, they became a delicacy for wild pigs. Such bad luck. This landscape was so unready for what has come to pass” (“Infernal Paradise” 200). This human penetration has cost Hawaii its native species. Haleakala Crater is still home to some highly endangered species because of its topography and its protected status. By pitying the human notion of home against the land as natural home, Kingsolver unravels irony of our existence. Awareness is spreading but we still have a long way to go. She writes, “The whole ecosystem is endangered. If the silver swords, nēnē geese, and other colorful endemics of Hawaii survive this century, it will be by the skin of their teeth. It will only happen because we decided to notice, and hold on tight” (“Infernal Paradise” 199-200). The perils of this ecosystem must make us aware of what is in store for our planet; a terrible loss of biodiversity. She acknowledges that it is very difficult to argue for preservation of every species but it is necessary. It will require a new perspective: “To love life, really, must mean caring not only for the garden plot but also the wilderness beyond the fence, beauty and mystery for their own sake, because of how meager a world would be without them” (“Infernal Paradise” 205). In order to reconnect with the land we need to pay attention. In “The Forest in the Seeds,” she discusses a new collection of Thoreau's unpublished writings, *Faith in a Seed*. She admires the patience which is necessary if we wish to witness the natural processes as simple as the dispersal of seeds. We seem to run out of time as far as paying attention to the most essential



things is concerned. She muses, "If only we could recover faith in a seed-and in all the other complicated marvels that can't fit in a sound bite. Then we humans might truly know the glory of knowing our place" ("The Forest in the Seeds" 242).

In "Knowing Our Place" from *Small Wonder*, she describes the two places that have become her homes in her adult life. One is in the desert outside Tucson and the other is a farm in southern Virginia (which resembles her childhood home). Both landscapes are distinctly different from each other, and Kingsolver professes her love for both in lyrical language teeming with sensory details. She discusses how she relies upon these landscapes for providing her clarity of thought. Connection with the land can save us from a life which is ignorant of its origin. As the urban sprawls are increasing we are losing our bond with the land. She states, "What we lose in our great human exodus from the land is a rooted sense, as deep and intangible as religious faith, of why we need to hold on to the wild and beautiful places that once surrounded us" ("Knowing Our Place" 39). She makes a strong case for preserving wilderness. Living in a world controlled by consumer culture, we need to taste the immensity of nature: "Wildness puts us in our place. It reminds us that our plans are small and somewhat absurd" ("Knowing Our Place" 40). The sensory details work as a synecdoche representing the countless other lives that also inhabit the land with us. These details remove humans as predominant part of the whole, and provide agency to all living beings.

"Why are river accounts so often elegiac?" Don Scheese asks this question while discussing Edward Abbey's account of his last journey along the Colorado River before it was dammed (311). Kingsolver has dedicated two essays to two different rivers. Both the essays are sad accounts of human intrusion upon the land. Rivers have always occupied a special space in human culture as well as imaginative representations of it. The slow demise of a river or permanent changes to its course evokes strong emotions because a river symbolizes beauty and power that encompasses many generations. The two rivers that Kingsolver describes belong to two different kinds of lands. The Horse Lick Creek flows mainly through human habitation, irrigating farmlands in Kentucky. The other river, the San Pedro in Arizona, is part of a precarious ecosystem. "The Memory Place" in *High Tide in Tucson* depicts her visit along with her daughter to the Horse Lick Creek in Jackson County, Kentucky. This place resembles her childhood home place. The essay begins with her memories of her childhood when she used to roam the woods in the company of her siblings. She immediately provides agency to the land to shape a person's identity when she acknowledges that all her knowledge and beliefs were formed in those woods ("The Memory Place" 171). In this essay, Kingsolver puts two distinct views of environmentalism in conversation with each other. We all raise our voices for preserving wilderness that is still untouched by human interference, but ignore the places that surround our homes and are marred by human activities. It is imperative to protect our "homeland" lest we become disenchanted with it and lose the sanctity of our memories. The tragedy befalling the Creek is in the form of scarred land and muddied water. The movement of traffic and cattle across the Creek is making the water muddy. This mud in water is death trap for the rare mussels found here as they have evolved in fresh water. The feeling of home is continuously maintained by describing the local activities and the town, and this land is also home to some rare species of bats and mussels. The slow death of the land here makes her realize the value of her present home as "a family treasure," for her daughter, which she vows to protect (179). One of the reasons of the Horse Lick Creek's woes is that this place has stopped being a home to a populace. People have migrated to towns for work and come back for temporary pleasure. This land is going to ruins like an abandoned home: "Careless recreation, and a failure of love for the land, are extracting their pound of flesh from Horse Lick Creek" ("The Memory Place" 177). By weaving the metaphor of home with this land Kingsolver makes a case for seemingly tame land which forms the core of our experiences. We need to embrace both wildness as well as our backyards as both constitute part and parcel of our home planet.

Another essay dedicated to a river is "The Patience of a Saint" in *Small Wonder*. This essay traces the journey of the San Pedro River from being marshy to a trickle in the desert. Human civilization has cost

this riverine ecosystem its life. A river is a home to a number of different species. The metaphor of home is again central here:

From a resident's point of view, though, the price of gold couldn't touch this family home. For the water umbel spreading delicate roots in a lucid pool, the leopard frog peering out through a veil of duckweed, the brush-prowling ocelot, and the bright-feathered birds that must cross this hostile expanse of land or find a living on it, the San Pedro is a corridor of unparalleled importance. ("The Patience of a Saint" 42)

In order to value this river "an animal frame of mind" is required (43). The tension between human home and natural home is visible here. The river harbors cottonwood forest on its banks. This forest, home to many species, is now under threat due to the falling water table. The visits to this river do not remind her of her childhood home but these visits are taken as a way to revere the nature and feel blessed. Saving this river is costly in terms of human world. But this river is a home to several species and is a sojourn in the path of migratory birds. The remnants of human settlements here tell a story of continuous human intrusion. Images of natural home versus man-made home (civilization) is juxtaposed to shake us from our complacent attitude: "People come and go, as plans begun so modestly inevitably burgeon and bluster until the land beneath our feet finally fails to support our big ideas" ("The Patience Of a Saint" 46). People can abandon the land and go but other creatures will continue to thrive as long as the river flows. Though the appeal to revise our concept of home is persistent and full of anguish, Kingsolver's message is always of hope and optimism. When someone asks how big this river is, the answer is "as big as life" (49).

If this essay ends with anguish, "A Forest's Last Stand" depicts that balance can be restored to the damaged ecosystems; and humans can coexist with nonhuman without ruthlessly destroying it. This essay relates her visit to the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve. This Reserve is located in the southern Mexico and is the largest tropical forest on the continent. The forest is losing its life to "cook fires and corn patches" of refugees pouring from neighboring Guatemala or fleeing Mexican poverty (80). This forest is saved by bringing about a change in the perspectives of the settlers. The homeless people are granted land around the forest and are educated about sustainable agriculture practices. But the change has not been easy for a group of people who have no cultural legacy of having a permanent home. This enormous shift in behavior is an inspiration.

"Called Out" is a beautiful small peace dedicated to nature's clock which mystifies humans. Describing the wild flower boom in Southern Arizona in the spring of 1998, the essay elaborates upon the mystery of evolution. Beautifully combining lyrical prose and science, Kingsolver pays homage to Darwinian principle of natural selection: "The species that have made it this far have encoded genetic smarts enough to outwit every peril. They produce seeds with different latency periods: Some germinate quickly, and some lie in wait, not just loitering there but loading the soil with many separate futures" ("Called Out" 91). Human agendas seem insignificant and myopic compared to this preparation taking place in nature. "Called Out" calls us out of our preoccupation with self-contained human life and places us in conversation with the nature around us. Taking an event from her home turf, she infuses us with the idea of paying attention to the larger schemes continuously taking place in the natural world. The meticulous contrast with the human garden and the nature's wildness puts us in our place. A species has worked for eons to prepare its design for survival, and we will need patience to comprehend that, "The flowers will go on mystifying us, answering to a clock that ticks so slowly we won't live long enough to hear it" ("Called Out" 92).

"Seeing Scarlet" in *Small Wonder* records a trip to Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica to see the scarlet macaw in order "to know this bird on its own terms" ("Seeing Scarlet" 51). One of the most widely recognized bird is also the one least associated with its natural habitat. Kingsolver puts the habitat and habits of this endangered bird at the core of this essay. To witness this magnificent bird at its home ground is a spiritual experience for the author. This bird is a victim of humans' inexplicable desire to own the beautiful nature. Though its beauty has economic value for the villagers dwelling in its neighborhood,

the image of village school children painting the school walls, and giving the scarlet macaw a central space in the painting is an indication of change in the attitude of the locals toward preserving their natural heritage. "Setting Free the Crabs" makes significant contribution to the environmental debate and makes her own stand clear. The damage we are causing to our biosphere is vast and irreparable. Though we are waking up to this realization, choosing the right course remains problematic. The anecdote about her "orchid grower" friends represents the irony of our situation. We may attempt to save the specimens of wilderness in our homes, but soon the bane of development will reach our homes and we will be left with nothing but specimens. Saving a species means saving its habitat, and a sufficient number of its members to continue its existence.

In the last section of *Sand County Almanac*, presenting his famous land ethic, Aldo Leopold states that such an ethic will require "love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value." He means value in "the philosophical sense." Barbara Kingsolver enacts this principle in her life. Letting go of possessive attitude is crucial if we wish to continue our survival. By evoking the image of home repeatedly, Kingsolver not only creates affinity with the nonhuman world but also points out that a home disjointed from the land that supports it will not last long. She underscores the importance of perception to fill us with a sense of appreciation for nature and encourages us to patiently observe nature around us, understand some basic principles of biology and ecology and feel grace in the lap of nature: "The first steps toward stewardship are awareness, appreciation, and the selfish desire to have the things around for our kids to see. Presumably the *unselfish* motives will follow as we wise up" ("Setting Free the Crabs" 68). When observation, understanding, and appreciation are combined we become capable of making sense of our place in the biological world, of understanding the routes and choices (cultural as well as ecological) that brought us to our present state, and of clearly envisioning a future for the generations to come.

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