

COMMUNITY AND CONNECTIVITY IN KINGSOLVER'S *PIGS IN HEAVEN*

Gowrishankar K, Assistant Professor of English, Pachaiyappa's College for Men,
Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract:

Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Pigs in Heaven* is a sequel and corrective to the earlier *The Bean Trees*. It is a portrayal of American Indians and the contemporary awareness of racial issues. The plot of the novel describes Taylor's responsibility of taking care of Turtle, her search for a job, her sharing of residence with Lou Ann, her friendship with the Guatemalan refugees, her popularity when they saved a mentally retarded man from the Hoover dam spot, Annawake Fourkiller threat to separate Turtle from her for not having legal adoption papers and her connection to Indians. This paper attempts to analyze the various aspects handled by Kingsolver to create or attain a community through connectivity through her characters.

Keywords: Kingsolver, *Pigs in Heaven*, Community, Connectivity, Native Americans, Indian Child Welfare Act, Cherokee.

Barbara Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven* expands the discussion of community and family to the level of the tribe. The community of choice inhabited by Taylor and her loved ones comes up against an older community, the Cherokee Nation, and its values. The premise of the novel is Taylor's adoption of Turtle recounted in *The Bean Trees*. The law brought into this book is the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978. The Act asserts that the Native American children cannot be adopted by non-native Americans without the permission of the child's tribal parents. Congress reviewed the law in 1996 because of concerns about the way in which it seemed to pit "the best interests of the child," defined purely as an individual who has bonded with loving adoptive parents, against the needs of tribes, which have lost many of their children to extra-tribal adoptions. A revised version of the act was passed on August 10, 1996.

Like their real-life counterparts, Kingsolver's characters must find a way to secure both a home and a tribal community for Turtle. Initially, the tribe and Taylor are at odds. Annawake Fourkiller, a Cherokee lawyer's twin brother was adopted outside the tribe, becomes aware of Turtle's existence. Annawake Fourkiller represents identity through tribal relationships and communal living. As a twin, her early sense of self hinged on the presence of her brother Gabe. His adoption out of the Cherokee Nation left Annawake personally bereft and led her to continue a crusade to keep Cherokee children within the tribe's jurisdiction. She visits Taylor and invokes the Indian Child Welfare Act.

The fear of losing Turtle to the tribe precipitates a panicked flight away from Taylor's Arizona community. Although Taylor had seemingly adopted the ideal of community, this threat awakens the American individualism in her. She cannot see Turtle's birth tribe as part of her community and attempts to live out the myth of the Lone Ranger. She must face what seems to her defeat. Taylor, like Campbell's hero, "submits to the absolutely intolerable" (108). Her final act of heroism is to drive to Oklahoma to face the Cherokee.

Alice Greer is waiting for Taylor in Oklahoma. Alice is presented as on her own quest, instead of merely supporting Taylor's. As her marriage to Harland Elleston "had failed to warm her" (1), she leaves him and joins Taylor and Turtle in their flight from Annawake Fourkiller. Kingsolver has developed Alice Greer as a wonderfully plausible older character. At sixty-one, Alice is independent, loving, and aware of

her own sexuality. She is not a Mattie figure, self-sacrificing or involved primarily in a social cause. She is an older version of Taylor.

When Alice begins to understand the issues at stake in Annawake's interest in Turtle, Alice goes to speak with her in Heaven, Oklahoma, claiming a desire to visit her cousin, Sugar Hornbuckle. Sugar and Alice had lived together as children on a hog farm in Mississippi and had taken their first jobs together. Both had married young, but Sugar, unlike Alice, married into a community that made room for her and is now a matriarch in the extended Hornbuckle family. Observation of Sugar's life, so different from hers, in spite of their similar beginnings, draws Alice toward the Cherokee community.

The Cherokee of Heaven are not idealised. They suffer from alcoholism and violence, as witnessed by Turtle's personal history: the child's mother committed suicide while her aunt chose to live with a hard-drinking man who was not only violent towards her, causing two hospitalisations, but who also sexually abused Turtle. Turtle's grandfather, Cash Stillwater, is so traumatised by the collapse of his family that he flees to Oklahoma without attempting to locate his grandchild. Annawake explains the trauma of her generation as a result of the federal disruption of Cherokee families during her parents' time. The "chain of caretaking got interrupted"(227) and she explains to Alice, that young Native people placed in faraway boarding schools forget their mother tongue because in schools they were forbidden to speak in their native language and eventually "the past got broken off" (227). Through people like Annawake's Uncle Ledger, a medicine man, relationships and traditions are reestablished and continued, providing a base for human and humane life.

The meaning of being part of the Cherokee community becomes apparent to Alice when she and Cash attend the "stomp dance." These dances are religious rituals that bring the community together in celebration of their history and their current ties. The dances are begun by young women who wear thirteen "shackles" on each leg, made from turtle shells, filled with gravel. These shells provide the instrumental music for the dancers and singers and Cash describes it as a music that sounds like the woods. Alice comes to feel that the experience of the dance was magical. The story of continued community is not one that she had heard before. Instead, in the fairy tales she knows, "spells get broken and magic doesn't endure" (272). In this story of the hero as imagined by Kingsolver, the magic of community endures as the basis of human life.

Alice understands the tribal point of view before Taylor does. Due to her depressed childhood, Alice understands and experiences continuity where Taylor can at first see only engulfment into a group or, worse, separation from Turtle. Alice's quest has begun again and led her to a new community and a new love. She is once again able to guide her daughter. Alice understands the position of Annawake in Taylor's interest through her narration of six pig story of Heaven.

Pigs in Heaven continues Taylor's story by enclosing her in an isolating poverty which she had never expected, as she attempts to live without the support of a community of friends and family. Taylor is comfortable in the role of a single-parent, working mother, and like her mother, she takes pleasure in meeting new people and seeing new places, easily making friends and establishing herself in a matriarchal community in Tucson, a city vastly different from the community in which she grew up.

Taylor makes the decision to go back and talk to Annawake and the Cherokee Nation, even though she is afraid of losing Turtle. Her love for Turtle and her concern for her best interest prove greater than her fears. She begins to understand that she cannot care for Turtle alone but only with the support of an extended family. Taylor's meeting with Annawake and Cash details her strong determination to keep Turtle with her. The enquiry that Taylor makes with Cash is once again a proof to show her mental strength. Taylor seeks a best future for Turtle. She thinks that it can be fulfilled only when she includes more people in her life. Taylor's love for Turtle can be more elaborately understood from her own words, "Turtle needs the best in the world, after what she's been through, and I've been feeling like a bad mother." Her voice breaks, and she crosses her arms over her stomach, already feeling the blow. How life will be without Turtle. It will

be impossible. Loveless, hopeless, blind. She will forget the colors” (320).

Taylor hopes Annawake would understand her love for Turtle. In the conversation Taylor regains her voice and confidence and continues that “Turtle deserves better than what she's gotten, all the way around. I love her more than I can tell you, but just that I love her isn't enough, if I can't give her more. We don't have any backup. I don't want to go through with this thing anymore, hiding out and keeping her away from people. It's hurting her” (320). The conflict between Taylor and Annawake is resolved after Taylor explains her love and her need for Turtle in her life. Annawake comes to understand a lot about life and love by Taylor. She understands Taylor's true love for Turtle. “Annawake's eyes turned on her, wide, but no word” (320).

Each arrives at a more expansive sense of family, home, and community. Annawake expands her sense of what it means to be a Cherokee. Annawake delivers a recommendation that comes from her expansive heart, not from her lawyer's partisan definition of Cherokee interests:

The Indian Child Welfare Act was designed principally to protect the tribe from losing its members. Our children are our future. But we want them to grow up under the influence of kindness and generosity.... What we have to do is satisfy the requirements of the tribe, without separating Turtle completely from the mother and grandmother she's come to love and trust. (338)

The solution that Annawake and social worker Andy Rainbelt propose that Turtle spend nine months of the year with Taylor and three months with her grandfather. Cash seems to emerge luminously from this “influence of kindness and generosity.” Marilyn Kongsliie quotes that “Kingsolver gives both sides of the issue equal time. The Cherokee Nation feels that community and culture are crucial to a child's identity and well-being, even though Turtle is clearly well loved by her white mother. Establishing contact with the Cherokee, people opens new possibilities to Taylor and Turtle” (1364).

Kingsolver pays attention to ethical conflicts, conflicts between law and emotion, and the claims of individual and the community. The conflicts solve as the characters in the novel are related to one another and they are noted by the variables of original Native American identity. Richard Gray in his essay states that “she builds a new life for herself and a new kind of “home” and “family” with friends and the abandoned child she takes up with her on the journey” (591). Her problems are solved when the solution is brought when the child's descendancy from Native American family tree is detected and her connection with her kith, kin, and community is restored. The novel ends with success on Taylor's side and through this thought provoking novel Kingsolver suggests to attain the community through connectivity.

Works Cited

1. Gray, Richard. “Crossing borders: Some women prose writers”. *A History of American Literature*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2004, pp 588-598.
2. Kingsolver, Barbara. *Pigs in Heaven*. Harper Perennial, 1994.
3. Kongsliie, Marilyn. *Barbara Kingsolver's Pigs in Heaven*. edited by H. D. Larsen, Steven G. Kellman. *Magill's Survey of American Literature*. Revised Edition Volume 3. Salem Press, pp 1361-1368.