

Social Profligacy and Self Assertion in Barbara Kingsolver's

The Poisonwood Bible

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Abstract

Barbara Kingsolver is an American novelist, social activist and author of the bestselling novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. Kingsolver's fourth novel *The Poisonwood Bible* was written out of her real-life experience in the Congo, Africa. The Novel unfurls the perspective of five women characters in the Price family, their struggle under the patriarchal domination of the Christian Minister, Nathan. The author parallels the patriarchal domination of Nathan over his wife Orleanna and daughters Rachel, Leah, Adah and Ruth May alongside the colonial oppression and social profligacy of Africa. Kingsolver in the novel appreciates the Congolese's simple way of living and their sense of revering nature. The cultural confrontation of Price family reveals the truth that, African land, culture and people are in no ways inferior to America. Nathan's corruptive means to captivate the Congolese People and land miserably fails, and moreover his family members start analyzing and emerging with their ontogenesis self. The present paper tries to throw light on the cultural confrontation of American and African culture, and the self-assertion of female characters.

Keywords: Social Profligacy, self-assertion, oppression, land, Confrontation.

Barbara Kingsolver is an American novelist, essayist and poet. She was raised in Rural Kentucky and lived briefly in the Congo in her early childhood. In Congo her parents worked in public health capacity, and the family lived without electricity or running water. The first three novels of Kingsolver deals with the Native American aspects of the American West, whereas the fourth novel *The Poisonwood Bible* is set up entirely in a different milieu, that is, in the Congo. In the Congo the ecological and communal ties of “God’s Kingdom is in its pure, unenlightened glory” (17). Kingsolver in the novel appreciates the Congolese’s simple way of living and their sense of revering nature. In 1959 an overzealous Baptist minister named Nathan Price drags his wife Orleanna and daughters Rachel, Leah, Adah and Ruth May deep into the heart of the Congo on a mission to save the unenlightened souls of Africa. The five women narrate the novel. From the outset, the attitude of five women cover a wide spectrum.

The Poisonwood Bible is a rabid indictment of Western colonialism and post-colonialism, an expose of cultural arrogance and greed. Nathan Price serves as the personal embodiment of Western hubris, unquestioning in his missionary zeal to overturn the ancient traditions of the Congo and replace them with his own religious beliefs. Mary Ellen Snodgrass in her book *Barbara Kingsolver: A Literary Companion* expresses that “Altruism is the force in Kingsolver’s novels that elevates them from entertainment to didactic humanism”. (39). It is Visible in *The Poisonwood Bible*, she amuses her readers and simultaneously elucidate to the serious issues.

Kingsolver in the novel vindicates the patriarchal domination imposed upon both land and woman. The novel highlights the difference between the eastern and western civilization and emphasizes that no civilization is superior enough to oppress the other because each one is diverse in its own way. Kingsolver exposes the racial and ethnic oppression inflicted upon the ‘others’. Kingsolver portrays the Congo as a landscape of poor that is constantly subjugated to the invasion

of external forces like the colonizers who pose themselves as superior hand later secede after uncovering the natural wealth of the landscapes. Kingsolver's description of the Congo as a land that is "mud-colored" (16) is the author's way of referring to the impoverished land that is far different from her previous novels. *The Poisonwood Bible* shows the historical impact of U.S. intervention in the Congo largely through the retrospective narration of Orleanna. Nathan Price represents as a new puritan, he preaches the salvation of Christianity and the superiority of American farming methods and technology, and the exceptional qualities of American culture. Nathan firmly believes that, the human body is a temple whereas for the Congolese "they are living in darkness. Broken in body and soul, and don't even see how they could be healed" (61). Nathan had a belief that God had chosen him to bring the world to a new light and to create a purified community. Kingsolver describes Nathan's views:

Nathan believed one thing above all else: that the Lord notices righteousness, and rewards it...if we suffered it was proof that one of us had committed a failure of virtue. I understood the failure to be mine. If I stood still for a moment in the backyard between hanging up sheets to notice the damp grass tingling under my bare feet, His eyes observed my idleness. God heard whenever I let slip one of my father's curse words, and He watched me take my bath, daring me to enjoy the warm water. (200)

Nathan's faith in God is complemented by his belief in the superiority of American culture. He believes that, sufferings are the just consequence of a failure of virtue. He plans to introduce American farming practices with a "demonstration garden" in Kilanga. His pride seems high when he shows the Congolese how to raise American crops like Kentucky Wonder beans and Big Boy tomatoes. He views Africans as inferior whom God punished for their failure of virtue. Nathan

believes that, sophisticated culture comes to Africa only with the arrival of Americans. “The Belgians and American business brought civilization to the Congo! American aid will be the Congo’s salvation” (121). He tells his daughter Leah that, after independence, American aid will “set right” (232) the slums outside Leopoldville. He sees America as a redeemer nation which is capable of solving the problems of unsophisticated Congolese. Above all he believes in American instrumentalism, that ‘take hold’ initiative to solve problems with latest techno scientific aid.

Nathan tries to reenact and update Jesu’s biblical miracle of the loaves and fishes, for instance, he promises Kilanga’s hungry people “the bounty of Lord, more fish than they had ever seen in their life” (78). He tries to perform a “backward version of the loaves and fishes and trying to stuff ten thousand fishes into fifty mouths” (80). Adah notices Nathan’s incapability to understand the geographical conditions of Africa, he sends workers to pitch dynamite in the river. Due to this foolish act there is “No ice” (81) to save the thousands of fish that have gone bad along the bank:

But after the underwater thunder, what came was not souls but fish. They came rolling to the surface with mouths opened wide by that shocking boom. Round shocked bubbles for eyes... Thousands of more fish jerked in the sun and went bad along the riverbanks... Our father forgot, for fishing in the style of modern redneck Georgia you need your ice. (81)

As Adah reports, the fish rot because of a lack of refrigeration, and “our village was blessed for weeks with the smell of putrefaction” (70). Climate conditions varies in regions, Nathan must have kept this light in his mind, shift from traditional fishing to modern fishing ends up in failure. The natives adopt traditional style of fishing, they know how to harvest in their own soil. In the tradition of American independence and individualism, Nathan follows the practice of Emersonian

self-reliance. When the Africans arrive at the airport to help the Prices navigate through customs, “Father made it clear we were completely self-reliant” (17).

The garden episode in the novel shows Nathan’s inability to understand either the soil or the souls. Nathan tries to plant a “demonstration garden” (41) using “Kentucky Wonder beans, crock neck and patty-pan, Big Boy tomatoes” (41) that he has brought from America. His intention is to show the natives that Americans are self-reliant. To prove this, Nathan plans his “Garden of Eden” (42) to be his “first African Miracle” (42) and instruct his daughter Leah to observe the Westerner miracles on agriculture. Leah proudly vows “I shall demonstrate to all of Africa how to grow crops!” (44).

Mama Tataba, a native old woman advises Nathan about both his method and a native poisonwood plant. Mama Tataba has been tending the soil ever since she could walk behind her father, she gets thoroughly accustomed to the agricultural methods of Africans. But the reverend Nathan contempts her words and cite the Scriptures. The following morning, he is “wounded by the plant that bites” (47). A horrible rash on his hands and arms a swollen eye caused by the red dust from the tree, make him feel cursed. “Ow! Great God Almighty, how did this curse come to me? When it’s God’s own will to cultivate the soil!” (47). Despite accepting his foolishness, he screams out his rage at his family.

Mama Tataba mounds the garden, changing the design from flat plain to hills as “a long regular dead human” (48) so that the seeds will grow, and later the family watches that, Nathan and Leah leveling it again. Nathan’s failed efforts contradicts his theory of balance and rewards, and his words signify nothing. Nathan’s family recognizes the cultural confrontation between America and Africa through the demonstration garden. In Nathan’s garden, even though the plants seem lush and green, it does not produce any fruits or vegetables since it has no pollinators.

The anthology entitled *Ethnoecology: Situated knowledge/located lives*, edited by Virginia D. Nazarea remarks, indigenous knowledge offers a useful framework for analyzing problems related to “environmental management, agricultural sustainability, biodiversity conservation, and intellectual property rights, as well as furthering a basic understanding of humans-in-environment” (viii). But in order to understand the primitive cultural practices to its full potential, one must move toward a dynamic approach—an approach that respects indigenous knowledge. Her ideas have a close affinity with that of Timothy Johns, she emphasizes that “native healers, and the knowledge they possess regarding the pharmacological value of tropical species of plants, constitute an invaluable resource for all humanity. . . virtually no compensation has been returned to indigenous communities for their contribution”(43).

Nathan believes in his cultural and racial superiority to the Congolese. Nathan regards Africans as lacking in maturity, intellect and sophistication; he also contemns them as pagans who worship false gods. When the people of Kilanga prepared a feast of welcome, Nathan rails against their “nakedness... and darkness of the soul!” (27) in a biblical harangue comparing them to the denizens of Gomorrah and Sodom. Nathan dismisses the natives trust in Gods and the ancestors as false idolatry and the traditional priest Tata Kuvudundu as a “witch doctor” (131). Nathan considers Brother Fowles foolish and deluded in his respect for the Congolese, and he ridicules Orleanna for treating Anatole as a valued guest at dinner. He says, the Congolese “don’t have the temperament or the intellect” to want political freedom and apply “the logic of children in a display of childish ignorance” (332). In the distorted nineteenth century imperialism, Nathan considers Africa as inadequately evolved, primitive and backward, a childish culture dwarfed by its grown-up Western colonizers and thus in need of help from the advanced West. As Leah points “My father thinks the Congo is just lagging behind and he can help bring it up to snuff” (284).

Nathan's patriarchal domination in the family is another issue portrayed in the novel. His attitudes towards women follow from his patriarchal faith in God's masculinity and his contempt for those who not identical to himself. He asserts that, women's purpose in life is to marry and support their mates. Leah mentions this domination "My father says that a girl who fails to marry is veering from God's plan" (149). When the elementary school teacher declares Leah and Adah as "exceptional children" Nathan seems irritated. Moreover, he warns Orleanna "not to flout God's Will by expecting too much for us. Sending a girl to college is like pouring water in your shoes, he still loves to say...its hard to say which is worse, seeing it run out and waste the water, or seeing it hold in and wreck the shoes" (56). Women's voices and thoughts annoy Nathan, who complains about the "blabber" of his family and who "often says he views himself as the captain of a sinking mess of female minds" (35). He hates sexuality, and fears nakedness and feels embarrassed by Orleanna's pregnancies. Nathan responds intercourse with a guilt "blaming me (Orleanna) for wantonness" (198).

At one point Leah comes to understand that, women have no place in her father's system of values, indeed no place in the Kingdom of Lord. "For father, the Kingdom of the Lord is an uncomplicated place, where tall, handsome boys fight on the side that always wins...but where is the place for the girls in that Kingdom? The rules don't quite apply to us, nor protect us either" (244). According to Nathan women and girls cannot be exceptional, they can only be the counterpart on men to assist them. In Nathan's understanding God's people are male; female can be called as mates and helpers. Nathan's punishments are hard, commonly explode over words that should not be spoken. He punishes with biblical verse and sometimes with physical violence as well; " he punishes Ruth May with the razor strop(54), hits Leah so hard he " leaves a hand shaped bruise on her neck...and beats Rachel so severely that she falls against the wall(156, 238).

All of Nathan's teachings are strict, he teaches passivity, not to raise voice, not to develop their own ideology, not to choose anything that they desire to have, and not to act against powerful male. He devalues their intelligence as "a mess of female minds" (132). Kingsolver portrays the view that Nathan's suppressed wife and daughters represent American patriarchal exceptionalism.

The Poisonwood Bible is a story of self-assertion as the fictional characters learn crucial lessons about their self. As many theorists observe, 'self' is programmed by one's gender, relationships, vocational and ideological affiliation, ethnicity, and some attributes like homelessness, isolation and identity crisis. These entities are closely knitted to one's interpersonal world and form the triggering forces for the discovery and formulation of the self. Social psychologist Klein, critic Robert A. Baron in *Social Psychology* observes that "the self concept is a special framework that influences how we process information about the social world around us along with information about ourselves such as our motives, emotional states, self-evaluation and abilities" (152-53).

Very early in one's life, one develops a social identity, or a self-definition, that includes how one conceptualizes and evaluates oneself. For a person, this identity includes aspects such as one's name and self-concept, and aspects shared with others. Familiar categories include one's gender and relationships such as woman, man, daughter and son. These various categories are closely linked to our interpersonal world. The humans spend a lot of time and effort in thinking about themselves. To some extent, one tends to be self-centered. That is, the self is the Centre of each person's social universe. Orleanna and her daughters do not overtly rebel against Nathan's rule till the death of Ruth May's death. On that day, ontogenesis of the self of Price family emerged. Orleanna, Rachel, Leah and Adah walk out of Kilanga in the rain, leaving behind Nathan and the God he represents. Their assessment of their own self in Africa instills courage to them,

they choose independent life. They understand, the social profligacy of American people is just like that of Africans, they are not superior to any other culture.

The individuality of the female characters become aware of the situations and prepares to implement their needs in a socially constructed atmosphere. They intend to liberate itself from some societal norms, which remains a hindrance. The women characters confront some patriarchal norms of the society through Nathan. But near the end of the novel, they struggle to overcome such odds and fixes an independent life in the socio-cultural canvas of the society. The journey of their self-assertion starts from the periphery to the centre. In recent years, Gayatri Spivak is associated with self, which is a main thrust of the Subaltern Studies Group. Critic Robert Young puts it in his assessment of Spivak's work in his *White Mythologies*:

Spivak shows how analysis of colonial discourse demonstrate that history is not simply the disinterested production of facts, but is rather a process of epistemic violence, an interested construction of a particular representation of an object, which may, as with Orientalism, be entirely constructed with no existence or reality outside, its representation. (158-59)

Kingsolver presents Congo as a contrast to the abundant lifestyles of the Americans who accumulate more material things more than what is necessary. The female characters of Price family understand Kilangans had only one dress per person and they use it every other day or occasionally they do not wear nothing at all. Besides the people could only feed themselves with a “grey looking smoldering stew” (29) called manioc and they always eagerly wait to be served “like a birds in the wilderness” (30).

Kingsolver also presents the sunny side of Africa. The author presents the Congo is not only a land that is well known for its abundant wealth but also known for its cultural dignity. Adah, the cripple, Africa is the only place where she is not treated as differently-able because “living in the Congo shakes open the prison house of my [her] disposition and lets all the wicked hoodoo Adahs run forth”(64). Adah thus becomes one among the “exceptional children” (65) of the country because “bodily damage is more or less considered to be a byproduct of living, not a disgrace” (84). At the end of the novel the female characters spiritually attached to the African soil. As Leah chooses Africa and renounces America, “when the neighbours or student ask me my nationality, I tell them I come from a country that no longer exists” (433). Leah visited America several times but she found herself “stranger each time” (466). Kingsolver’s novel links cultural confrontation of Americans with Africa, the female characters in the novel observe the absurdity of dreaming American exceptionalist promises. The author demolishes the false belief that, Americans are different kind; privileged from Africans. Moreover, the readers learn the fact that, African culture, just like any other culture, is dignified.

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