

INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THE LOCAL AND GLOBAL IN KINGSOLVER'S SELECT WRITINGS

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Received: 14 Nov 2019

Accepted: 20 Nov 2019

Published: 27 Nov 2019

ABSTRACT

*Ecofeminists and Deep Ecologists reject the androcentric and anthropocentric hubris and espouse a theory of interconnectedness between all forms of life on earth. Ecofeminists also oppose all forms of oppression across the intersectional identities of race, class, gender, region, and nation. While the interconnectedness can be seen as a feeling of empathy towards all oppressed beings, nature and animals included, it can also be extended to the realm of, as is apparent in, the causes and effects of ecological phenomena on a global scale. The proposed paper would attempt to read Barbara Kingsolver's select essays from *High Tide in Tucson* and *Small Wonder* that discuss a range of interconnected environmental issues ranging from species/habitat/wilderness conservation, industrial capitalism-induced consumer culture, its effect such as massive industrial pollution, global climate change and their disastrous repercussions. Kingsolver is a contemporary American author who sets most of her works in the southern/ south western United States, around local socio-ecological issues. However, they can also be related to global environmental issues, as well as local issues in any part of the globe, thereby emphasizing the idea of interconnectedness in terms of causes and effects. Ironically, it is also in the same concept of interconnectedness that Kingsolver pins her hopes on. The present paper would attempt a reading of Kingsolver's essays in the framework of environmental justice theories.*

KEYWORDS: *Kingsolver's, Deep Ecologists & Ecofeminists*

INTRODUCTION

Barbara Kingsolver is a contemporary American author of fiction and non-fiction, who is widely recognized as an ecofeminists writer. Her novels are set around local socio-ecological issues which are also implications of global issues. She brings together a wide range of environmental predicaments that challenge the current world such as toxic pollution, species extinction, habitat depletion, industrial capitalism-induced consumer culture, its effect such as massive industrial pollution, global climate change and their disastrous repercussions. As much as she discusses the ecological, she also looks at the socio-cultural causes and effects of these ecological challenges.

The objective of this paper is to read Kingsolver's select works and analyse her treatment of environmental issues with the awareness of interconnectedness between humans and nature, thereby placing the natural with the cultural, the ecological with the socioeconomic and the political. The paper begins with discussing the interconnection of environmental issues with the realms of socioeconomic, political and the cultural. The second part of the paper discusses how Kingsolver attempts to make positive use of these interconnections. Through these two analysis, it can be seen how Kingsolver's

efforts can be seen as small act of resistance and responsibility toward one's local and global society and ecosystem. A realization of these interconnections is severely pertinent today in the wake of global climate change.

Critics like Lawrence Buell and Ramachandra Guha have identified the different waves of American environmentalism, with the first wave constituting the celebration of the American landscape and wilderness from the nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century. Some of the representatives of this wave include John Muir among the preservationists and Gifford Pinchot among the conservationists; the Transcendental school of Philosophy held a meditative approach to nature. The second wave of environmentalism is said to have begun with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. While the first wave celebrated nature and the wilderness for either their serenity, as a resort for man worn out by civilization, the second wave in the 1960s saw nature or environment, not merely as a romantic or philosophical concept of a pristine solace to be worshiped and admired, but as the immediate air, water and land that we use, the food we eat and our very survival on this planet. Carson's book came out as a revelation that the metaphorical silence of the Spring season is directly related to man's indiscrete exploitation of nature for profits. While there was a new environmental awakening in America in the 1960s, ironically the decade also witnessed the boom of Green Revolution with its purportedly benevolent claim to feed the hungry population of the world, especially the Third World. The entire power dynamics that followed up to Globalization and after has strengthened the hegemony of America, in particular, and Global North, in general, at the expense of the lives of people of the Global South.

Ecofeminists and Deep Ecologists reject the androcentric and anthropocentric hubris and espouse a theory of interconnectedness between all forms of life on earth. Ecofeminists also oppose all forms of oppression across the intersectional identities of race, class, gender, region, and nation. While the interconnectedness can be seen as a feeling of empathy towards all oppressed beings, nature and animals included, it can also be extended to the realm of (as apparent in) the causes and effects of ecological phenomena on a global scale. Kingsolver discusses environmental degradation manifested in depletion of wilderness, habitat destruction, pollution of air, water, soil, the decline and impending demise of local agricultural economy, and the Big industry which has usurped agriculture (agribusiness), its impact on the health of the ecosystem, human health, food cultures, and consumption patterns, which, in turn, have their footprint on the environment. She also comments on the role of the political economy, media, education, and orthodox religion in the context of dissemination of knowledge and attitudes towards the environment. Kingsolver uses the text, both fiction and nonfiction, as the site where she brings all her politics into play, and convey scientific matters in easily comprehensible narratives to make these ideas accessible to common people, as these are issues that concern them. Her treatment of interconnected issues echo Barry Commoner's Four Laws of Ecology which he discusses in his work *The Closing Circle* - The laws are as follows: 1) Everything is connected to everything else 2) Everything must go somewhere 3) Nature knows best 4) There is no free lunch. Kingsolver's essays constantly remind each of these laws in many ways.

In an essay titled "The Patience of a Saint", she describes a visit to a dying river San Pedro in Arizona. She discusses the harmful effects of industrial agriculture, pollution, and indiscrete exploitation of natural resources, which have destroyed the biodiversity of the place, and has affected the local economy. In another essay titled "A Forest's Last Stand," Kingsolver describes her travel through Mexican countryside, and notes of her observations about the living heritage of the ancient Mayan civilization in its language, customs, and traditional attires. The position of Mexican national economy, enmeshed in the regional and transnational economy dominated by the US, is referred to, through the references of the PEMEX (*Petroleo Mexicano*) gas station, and the hoarding of an agri-chemical company. Mexico's position as a

member of NAFTA (North-Atlantic Free Trade Agreement), the trade policies of which will be dominated by the US, although Mexico at one point of time used to produce plenty of petroleum. Yet another point of discussion is the description of a village of Guatemalan refugee families engaged in subsistence farming in the borders of a Bio-reserve area. Juxtaposition is a common technique Kingsolver uses for showing the contrasts. In this case, the dependent state of Mexico on NAFTA is discussed between two thriving local and tradition-based self-sufficient economies. Thereby, the difference between the global and the local, the big and the small economy is brought out vividly.

In an essay titled "A Fist in the Eye of God," Kingsolver discusses three important areas that are relevant for the dissemination of awareness or ignorance about environmental degradation. She discusses religion, education, and science in the context of the present environmental concerns. Her choice of these topics is important because these are raging and controversial issues even in present day America. Historically, since the publication of Darwin's evolutionary theory, science and religion, evolutionary theory and the story of biblical Genesis have been perceived as binaries. But Kingsolver perceives the two as not binaries but related concepts, where, evolution, according to her, is "a fine creation story, a sort of quantifiable miracle" (*Animal Vegetable Miracle* 334). She conflates the two seemingly contradictory realms by describing the evolution as an unfolding of the wonder of creation. Juxtaposed with this, it is her fierce criticism of some of the state legislatures that banned the teaching of evolution in schools of Tennessee in different periods of time, for over a century. The most controversial of them being the Scopes Trial of 1926, and the latest one being in 2012 - also dubbed popularly as the Monkey law¹. As a result, she finds that, people are deprived of a scientific temper, basic critical thinking, or openness to new thoughts. She writes,

In a bizarre recent trend, a number of states have limited or even outright banned the teaching of evolution in high schools, and many textbooks for the whole century, in turn, have wimped out on the subject. As a consequence, an entire generation of students is arriving in college unprepared to comprehend or pursue good science. We dilute and toss at our peril. Scientific illiteracy in our population is leaving too many of us unprepared to discuss or understand much of the danger we are wreaking on our atmosphere, our habitat, and even the food that enters our mouth. (96)

Kingsolver illustrates the dangers of this situation in her novel *Flight Behaviour*, which discusses the topic of climate change, and the debate about whether climate change is real or not. The point that she tries to make is that the very gesture of acknowledging that climate change is real itself might prompt a shift in thinking in the way one perceives one's immediate ecosystem. She also critiques the conservative media and the entertainment industry that decides what the people need to consume, what they need to think about, and what should be in trend. She relates this briefly to consumption of fashion, and in a major way to the consumption of food. In *Animal Vegetable Miracle*, Kingsolver observes the post-War boom in American culture, which particularly reflected in the consumption patterns of food. She notes that from being a product of land and culture, food has been turned into an industrial product. She analyses the rapid proliferation of supermarkets and fast food chains, and the trend of having all kinds of food products, fruits and vegetables being made available throughout the year irrespective of season or geography. She calls this industry the "profit driven food industry" (17) owing to the massive amounts of fuel required to processes, store, and transport these food products to different places. Another threat that she finds in this regard is the destruction

¹ Miller, Kenneth R. "America's Darwin Problem." in *HuffPost*. 11 April, 2012. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/darwin-day-evolution_b_1269191; National Center for Science Education. "Background on Tennessee's 21'st Century Monkey Law" 25 February, 2016. <https://ncse.ngo/background-tennessees-21st-century-monkey-law>; Thompson, Helen. "Tennessee's Monkey Bill Becomes Law." *Nature*. 11 April, 2012. <https://www.nature.com/news/tennessee-monkey-bill-becomes-law-1.10423>

of many local food cultures and a threat towards homogenizing cultures at the cost of human health and that of the planet. She finds these processing units as serious detriments to the health of people, land, air, water etc. In the same vein, she talks about the CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations), many of them spread across the Mid West. This industry makes use of vast areas of fields for the cultivation of corn and grains that are used as cattle feed, and not to address human hunger. These cattle then are used as meat in fast food. Prior to this, vast areas of forests in the Amazon forest in South America are cleared and used as cattle ranches, which also result in displacement of people, cultures, local economies, and instead fatten up the profits of the meat industries.

It is a matter of environmental racism where the elite industrialists set up factories in places that assure them low cost of production and labor, and lenient environmental laws. In most cases, such units are set up at places populated by the minority communities. While Kingsolver does not directly talk about the Global South, she talks about her immediate and familiar geography of the American Southwest, where she witnesses this. *Holding the Line* discusses the role of women, working class Hispanic housewives supporting their husbands on a strike against a mining company for polluting the river which they use for their sustenance. In another essay titled, "In the Belly of the Beast", she describes a visit to a missile museum in Arizona. She describes what she saw and what they were told at the museum as follows:

A ring of Titan II missiles, we were told, encircled Tuscan from 1962 to 1984. The Titan II was "conceived" in 1960 and hammered together in very short order with the help of General Motors, General Electric, Martin Marietta, and other contractors. The launch sites are below ground – "safely protected from a nuclear blast. Titan II can be up and out of its silo in less than a minute, hurling its payload at speeds of over 15,000 miles per hour nearly halfway around the world. (208)

This is a place in Arizona which is predominantly populated by working class Mexican Americans, and many native American reservations, which are also incidentally the sites chosen to hold nuclear tests. She goes on,

In Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Texas, the Great Plain, and many more places we aren't allowed to know about, real live atomic bombs stand ready. Our leaders are hard pressed to pretend some foreign power might invade us, but we are investing furiously in the tools of invasion. (213)

In her novels *Bean Trees* and *Animal Dreams* there are references to the Sanctuary Movement which intended to give illegal shelter to the refugees fleeing political crises in central American countries, which in turn was propelled by American foreign policy, American funds and weapons – a part of these funds come from the citizen's tax money as well as profits made from chemical and manufacturing industries that wreak havoc on the underprivileged people's lives and their ecosystem.

Kingsolver also talks about the condition of the rural agricultural communities in the Southeastern states, who have lost their jobs and farms to agribusiness, and impoverished lives are made worse every year with the occurrence of thunder storms, cyclones, hurricanes, and floods. This is the condition of the people, some of the margins within the United States itself. The nation and its industrial capitalist political economy represent a power centre that does not care for its own citizen let alone the citizens of the world.

While she meanders seamlessly from one topic to another unraveling the interconnectedness of issues, which she primarily discusses in the case of America. However, with globalization, the same effects and formats trickle down to the

Third World countries as well, because these geographies are also the market that American global economy has been thriving on. For the profit of a few transnational business owners of the Global North, the lives of the people in the Global South are endangered through perpetual economic exploitation and ecological vulnerability. The United States' refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and the decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement comes as a massive threat, particularly to the people of the lowing lying islands of the Global South. This is also highly discussed in the debates on the disparities and iniquities between the Global North and the Global South.

Climate change is a global phenomenon which has its manifestations in different local regions across the globe. There are debates about the inequity of distribution of risks and benefits, as the Global North contributes the most to carbon emissions and the risks are faced by the Global South which faces multiple challenges such as economic dependence, ecological dangers, and in much cases political instability. Though Kingsolver does not directly discuss the effects in the Global South, she discusses the case of some of the marginalized communities in America - such as the poor white farmers of the South, and the working class immigrant families of the Southwest. For instance, the farm families in the American South face the dual or multiple dangers of a) failure of subsistence economy resulting in debt and economic deprivation, b) effects of climate change, especially the coastal states in the form of tornadoes and hurricanes c) a dis-empowered social system with people wallowing in "backwardness" although there are modernized and industrialized urban areas, which in turn increase the disparity between people in society.

While the problems Kingsolver discusses with respect to the interconnectedness of the socio-cultural, political, economic and the ecological present quite a remorseful picture, Kingsolver shows that this awareness of the interconnectedness can be translated into personal responsibility and ethics as means to initiate, if not explicitly great changes, at least as small acts of resistance or as efforts to mitigate or minimize harm.

Karen J. Warren defines her ecofeminist philosophy based on the awareness of an interconnectedness between the oppression of women and Others (other human Others and the non human Other nature) perpetrated by what she refers to as "the logic of dominance". She notes that this dominance is unjustified and has to be resisted with a counter narrative. She identifies eight types of interconnections at various levels such as the philosophical, conceptual, historical, linguistic etc. Therefore, from the premise of this interconnectedness, she vouches for a new ecofeminist ethic – an ethic of care that entails love, friendship, and community feeling. In place of the logic of domination that is centered around an ethos of violence, callousness and irresponsibility, Karen Warren's ecofeminist philosophy constitutes a care-sensitive ethic based on the logic of love, caring, mutual respect, friendship, sharing, community feeling, and diversity.

What Karen Warren calls the logic of domination is perpetrated and kept intact and made stronger by the day. This political economy is dominated by the transnational conglomerates driven by the motive of profit maximization. They are serve to propagate the ideology of what environmentalists terms as Cornucopia which further drives the indiscrete, utilitarian and exploitative approaches to nature, with the false notion that resources are limitless and limitless progress is desirable and attainable (Garrard 16). They impose themselves on smaller economies, through the metanarrative of "progress for all", jobs for all, or efforts to eliminate hunger in the Third World (as the project of Green Revolution had promised).

As opposed to the logic of neo-imperial proxy domination, Arjun Appadurai advocates the mini-narratives of resistance through what he terms as “grassroot globalization or the globalization from below” (quoted in Adamson 8). This need not necessarily be a globally interlinked phenomenon, but can even be small projects of resistance to global political economy through turning local. The return to the land, and the call for sustainable development has been suggested measures to minimize the impact of indiscrete measures of industrial capitalism in the world. This has also been perceived as a mark of distrust of the Big industry and the Big government, and as a sign of faith in the initiatives of indigenous collectives or grassroot organizations where people come forward to protect their environment because it is also about protecting their lives and their children’s future. E. F. Schumacher, in his seminal work *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, asserts the need for initiatives to boost economies which is also important in terms of the social and ecological point of view. He argues for the need to revise economic policies such that profit maximization does not become blind to the conditions of the people. P. Sainath’s work and rural reporting, compiled in *Everyone Loves a Good Drought*, provides painful demonstrations of the blindness of economic policies to the plight of the common farmers, who are brutally implicated by an economy enmeshed in the global trade policies. Vandana Shiva’s writings affirm the need to reclaim traditional agricultural practices and food cultures based on crop diversity, from the clutches of the big industries that has imposed monocultures. All these ideas point towards moves to turn to the local with an awareness of the global, and with a sense of responsibility of how small initiatives could possibly make a difference in the long run.

Kingsolver’s ecological ethic is informed by all these ecological thoughts, which she displays in her writings with a view to what Appadurai calls as the globalization of the dissemination of knowledge (quoted in Adamson 9). Following the tradition of Rachel Carson, Kingsolver makes use of her educational background in biology and evolutionary ecology, and democratizes the awareness of interconnectedness of ecological and cultural issues in an idiom that is not esoteric, but accessible to common readers. She advocates discretion in one’s consumption patterns, producing/ cultivating seasonal food as opposed to buying from the supermarket. From her own experience of her family’s experiment as documented in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, and through her agrarian vision in the introduction to *Essential Agrarian Reader*, she endorses initiatives such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), local consumption which includes buying from the farmer’s market, which will help the farmers survive, depending on one’s resources, and finding a sense of responsibility towards one’s immediate ecosystem and land.

Thus, as opposed to the attitude of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard), which is popular, especially in elite, urban spaces, Kingsolver exhorts her readers to begin action right at our backyards, or in the neighbourhoods, so that, at least it amounts to small steps towards saving the immediate habitats, which in turn will have positive impact on globally. One of the limitations of Kingsolver’s ecocritical approach is that she writes from the First World and elitist perspective. But, she herself acknowledges her privileges and says that knowing that she is privileged, compels her to be responsible as well. She rests her hope in the commitment towards small acts of making informed choices based on the awareness of interconnectedness – both as individual and collective responsibility to oneself, the others, and the earth. Although some of her writings do celebrate the beauty and wonder of nature, and her own privilege of being able to enjoy it in different geographies, her essays are not merely narratives of escapades and eulogy, but firmly grounded in the local place not in a parochial sense but with an awareness of the larger world.

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AUTHOR PROFILE

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