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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mitigation of human-nature estrangement through pro-environmental behavior in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

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Abstract – Humans are designed to live in harmony with nature. As time pass by, people have become increasingly disconnected from nature and have begun to control it, considering it an entirely other entity. Man's environment-destructive behavior is the reason for the human-nature estrangement in this Anthropocene. Bridging and healing the divide is critical because if it is neglected, the ramifications are unimaginable. Focusing on mitigating the human-nature divide, this article is interested in sketching new directions in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* through pro-environmental behavioral analysis. Pro-environmental behavior is the attitude of humans that promotes a healthy and sustainable environment. It is pertinent to have environmentally responsible behavior for the betterment of the planet because people fail to understand that exploiting nature for their benefit often backfires. There are many approaches to mitigate human-nature estrangement, but using pro-environmental behavior to diminish the dichotomy is feasible and practical. Various studies have analyzed this novel from various perspectives but the present study analyzes the pro-environmental aspects of the novel to blur the human-nature dichotomy.

Keywords – Ecocriticism, Human-Nature divide, American Environmentalism, Pro-environmental Behavior, and Anthropocentrism.

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INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is the representation of nature in literature. It examines the relationship between nature and literature. As Barry Commoner says, everything is interconnected in his first law of ecology (2020). Every organism is interconnected with one another for survival. According to him, the ecosystem is stable because it is interrelated and maintains stability. If this stability is shattered, it may lead to a dramatic collapse. When humans repel nature, it results in unimaginable repercussions. It is observed that humans have repelled nature because of urbanization, industrialization, scientific advancements, and various other factors. People have been isolated from nature for a long time and have ceased connecting with it. The reason for the disharmony is the dysfunction of the human ethical system (Glotfelty & Fromm, 2009).

Another reason observed by the researcher is the lack of Pro-Environmental Behavior. Pro-environmental Behavior sprung from Fishbein and Ajzen's theory of planned behavior. The theory of planned behavior extends the theory of reasoned action. It is an environment-friendly behavior. In simple terms, it is an altruistic behavior towards the environment. According to this theory, an individual's behavior could positively and negatively impact the environment. Individuals' negative behavior towards the environment is not deliberate or purposeful. They are unaware of the consequences of their behavior on the environment.

Vining et al. state unethical behavior toward nature are because "The value that a person places on an environment may play a role in whether or not she views herself as a part of or separate from nature" (p.02, 2008.) In addition, other factors worsen the human-nature rift, which must be addressed to heal the bisect.

We observed that the inception of the environmental movement in America is itself considered a pro-environmental behavior. Since *Prodigal Summer* is an American eco-fiction, prior knowledge of American environmentalism and the rise of pro-environmentalism is discussed for better comprehension.

OBJECTIVES

The article aims to bridge the gap between humans and nature, which jeopardizes the prospects for a sustainable way of life. The researcher also makes an effort to distinguish pro-environmental attitudes and environmentally destructive behaviors in *Prodigal Summer*. Attempts are made to find out whether the novel and the characters are fostering sustainability, whether their choices are nature-enhancing, and how the characters display a close association with nature, categorized as pro-environmental behaviors.

METHODOLOGY

An ecocritical perspective is used to analyze the novel *Prodigal Summer* on a qualitative scale. The novel has three storylines, and the characters in each display both a pro-environmental attitude and an environmentally destructive attitude. Both of these actions are extensively analyzed and examined. Instances drawn from the novel help to distinguish the different attitudes towards nature. Finally, it is explained how pro-environmental conduct helps to lessen the rift between humans and nature.

DISCUSSION

American Environmentalism- Dawn of Pro-Environmental Attitude

Literature in America flourished on the grounds of American Nationalism. It is often referred to as nation-centered literature. Traditional American Studies unfold Americans' rich culture, focusing on race, gender, ethnicity, and class. On the contrary, New American studies realized that American culture is diverse and immigrants' contribution to shaping the American culture cannot be neglected. Therefore, American studies include descriptions of immigrants. While all these adaptations were happening, an environmental movement emerged in America later in the twentieth century.

The commencement of this movement is itself considered a dawn of pro-environmental attitude. Following this many writers came forward to promote green ideas through their works. Rachel Carson's revolutionary work *Silent Spring* was published in 1962 that spearheaded the propagation of ecological consciousness among readers. She voiced out against the use of harmful chemical pesticides and their consequences. Many eminent American writers failed to concentrate on ecological ideas since they were engaged in post-structural ideologies, making ecocritical discourse remain at the periphery. All the literary communities were obsessed with post-structural ideologies. Indriyanto rightly stated Derrida's idea that "there is nothing outside the text... and reality is constructed in language" (2020). Obsession with

post-structural ideologies dominated American literature for ages.

Lately, post-structural thoughts in literature dissipated and ecological thoughts emanated with the publication of *Silent Spring*. Following Carson, pantheons of American transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Margaret Fuller brought green shades to literature. "Living space" became the focal point of their writing because these transcendentalists experienced profound isolation. They share a personal and spiritual connection with nature. These transitions in American literature and the writer's inclination towards ecological consciousness can be marked as an intense emergence of pro-environmental attitudes among Americans.

Pro-Environmental Behavior

Many environmental theories are advancing to cope with environmental issues. Recently many theories emphasize analyzing the impact of individual behavior on the environment. For instance, the Theory of Planned Behavior was extended from the Theory of Reasoned Action by Fishbein and Ajzen since they deal with the motivation and intention behind a particular behavior.

Jan Krajhanzl elaborates on the definition of pro-environmental behavior. According to Krajhanzl, pro-environmental behavior is environmentally friendly behavior or behavior that has no or less impact on the environment. He lists a few examples of pro-environmental behavior, such as "... a bicycle ride is more positive than the ride in a car, holidays located near home are more favorable than traveling to another continent" (p.252, 2010).

The development of pro-environmental behavior cannot be understood in isolation. As Sawitri et.al states "... studies have used the theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behavior, norm activation theory, and values-beliefs-norms theory to explain pro-environmental behavior" (Sawitri et al., 2015). These theories are widely used to explain pro-environmental behavior.

Reinforcing Pro-environmentalism in *Prodigal Summer*

Sawitri et.al defines pro-environmental behavior as the "...conscious actions performed by an individual to lessen the negative impact of human activities on the environment or to enhance the quality of the environment" (2015). This definition suits the renowned American author Barbara Kingsolver who is well known for her novels on fostering environmental awareness. Her novel *Prodigal Summer* has three intersecting plots titled "Predator", "Moth Love", and "Chestnut Trees". Three main characters Deanna Wolf, Lusa Landowski, and Garnett Walker display a wide range of pro-environmental attributes throughout the novel ensuring the connectedness with nature.

Deanna's Proclivity in Promoting Pro-environmental Attitudes

The novel's first part is titled "Predator", where Deanna Wolfe plays a significant role. She is a forest ranger on Mount Zebulon who stayed there researching coyotes. She fell in

love with Eddie Bondo, a hunting youth. Contrary to Deanna, Eddie hunts coyotes as they threaten his livestock considerably. Eddie has a proclivity for destruction, whereas Deanna has a penchant for preservation. Despite the contradictions, Deanna develops an intense romantic interest in Eddie, but she cleverly uses every opportunity to keep him from shooting coyotes.

Deanna's fierce protectiveness is highlighted when she becomes furious at Eddie's hunting behavior, "I cannot understand that kind of passion for killing a living thing. An enemy" (Kingsolver, 2013, p.117). As Barbara Wenz mentions that Aldo Leopold is also against hunting. He vehemently refutes the elimination of keystone predators as it would sabotage the richness of the ecosystem. Keystone species are on the verge of extinction yet serve a critical role in preserving ecological equilibrium. Like Wenz, Swatilekha Mahato reiterates the significance of keystone species. She says, "Their extinction can bring drastic changes in the environment, and it will cause loss of biodiversity" (2017, p.221).

Significance of Coyotes in the Ecosystem

Each species plays its crucial role, and "... losing certain species can have disproportionate effects on the structure and function of ecosystem" (Benson et al., 2017, p.01) Individual species play an influential and significant role in the ecosystem, which is complex to comprehend. When top predators like coyotes are terminated or endangered, prey species multiply and cause an imbalance in the ecosystem. Coyotes are the top predators; they substitute the role played by the wolves in the ecosystem. Being a forest ranger and a genuine nature preserver, Deanna is aware of the importance of coyotes.

Suzanne Jones commented on the prominence of the existence of coyotes saying, "...coyotes will help restore the imbalance in the ecosystem caused by the loss of larger predators (wolves and mountain lion) in this habitat" (2006, p.85). However, researchers have non-identical views. On the one hand, researchers argue that coyotes fit in the shoes of wolves appropriately. On the other hand, researchers say coyotes cannot substitute for wolves. Coyotes are omnivores and feed on rodents, rabbits, moose, and deer. When moose and deer are not hunted, they feed on native plants. Therefore, an imbalance in the ecosystem is created. Coyotes are the requisite species that maintain the food web and balance the ecosystem. If such species are hunted and endangered, the ecosystem is at stake (Benson et al, 2006).

Deanna's conserving attitude towards coyotes represents a positive human-animal relationship. Rault Jean L. et al. state, "Positive human-animal relationships can elicit positive emotions and other positive welfare outcomes" (2020, p.01). Similarly, "The human-animal relationship is also influenced by human characteristics, such as the person's familiarity with the animal, attitudes, skills, and knowledge" (Rault, 2020, p.01). Deanna shared a similar attitude, which is evident when Barbara says, "She knew the animal's size from the path it had left through the glossy undergrowth of mayapples, and that was enough to speed up her heart" (Kingsolver, 2013, p.04).

In addition to the human-animal relationship, Deanna has a profound affinity towards nature as she knows when the dawn ends and when the dusk begins. She never wore a watch; she just observed the shift in the breeze and the sounds of the caterpillar. Deanna's actions throughout the novel reflect her pro-environmental attitudes, and her overzealous coyote protection is a reflection of her connection to nature as a whole.

Lusa's Transformation- From an Amateur to a Skilful Farmer

The novel's second part is entitled "Moth Love", where Lusa Landowski, a passionate entomologist, inherits land from her dead husband, Cole Widener. She is marooned after marriage and develops a profound love for farming and moths. She studies the behavior of moths while she performs her farming duties. Lusa's idiosyncrasies are different from Deanna's proclivity. According to Lusa, nature is plaited in every aspect of her life. Like Deanna, Lusa consistently fights with her husband to safeguard the environment, especially over the removal of honeysuckle. "This week's gardening column was devoted to eliminating honeysuckle. That had been the jumping-off point for their argument" (Kingsolver, 2013, p.35). Like Eddie and Deanna, Lusa, and Cole had different opinions.

Cole grows tobacco on his farm, and Lusa denounces his crop choice. Though she is an amateur in farming, she cares about the land and the environment. Tobacco is injurious to the environment and the cultivation of tobacco makes the land lose its nutrients, and the subsequent crop cultivation will be at stake. According to Thomas E Novotny et al., tobacco cultivation requires extensive use of chemicals, growth inductors, and pesticides. It will not only undermine the quality of the soil but also plunges deeply and affects the water quality. "Research has also shown that tobacco crops deplete soil nutrients by taking up more nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium than other major crops" (Novotny et al. 2015).

Even though tobacco is a profitable crop, Lusa is unwavering in her commitment to the environment and acts pro-environmentally even in the toughest circumstances. Cole's activities, which contrast sharply with Lusa's, demonstrate environmentally damaging behavior. Despite being an amateur in agriculture, Lusa managed the challenges with the land. Lusa deliberately followed land ethics throughout the narration which is again a pro-environmental attitude.

Significance of Land Ethics

Aldo Leopold defines land ethics as "...the relationships between people and land are intertwined: care for people cannot be separated from care for the land. A land ethic is a moral code of conduct that grows out of these interconnected caring relationships" (2022). *Prodigal Summer* primarily focuses on the protagonists' bond with nature and natural spaces. The novel is structured with numerous perspectives regarding land, animal, and ecosystem. However, the layered views are condensed into a common goal: striving for a healthier ecology. Peter S. Wenz elaborated on how Aldo Leopold's land ethic is incorporated in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*. He began his article by summarising the

work's storyline to demonstrate how Barbara employs the notion of land ethics per se through the central characters (2003).

Lusa has an inexplicable bond with nature, whereas her family members' vision of nature is inconsiderate, completely contrasting with her organic visions of Lusa. As Anne McConnell and Thomas Saladyga rightly stated, "...landscape is not inherent to a particular physical setting but, rather, reflects human ways of seeing and defining space—frameworks that arise from social and economic factors" (2019, p.03). Lusa's family approached nature with monetary value and sought economic benefits as they were more inclined towards tobacco farming. Unlike her family members, Lusa's land ethic is inherited from her culture and upbringing.

Lusa's mother is a Palestinian, and her father is a Jew from Poland. She is familiar with her parent's traditions. In their tradition, they tend to eat organically raised goats during feast days. She raised the goats organically when planning to find what to do with her land. While she is ecologically concerned, her niece Crys lacks land ethics and ecological concern. When Lusa economically stumbled after Cole's death, Crys suggests Lusa sell the trees and mindlessly asks, "...after all who needs trees?" (Kingsolver, 2013, p.122). Crys represent the future generation, and it is disheartening to know that the current generation lacks an environmental conscience. From this elucidation, Lusa's penchant for nature is evident. Her characterization helps eliminate the human-nature bisect, and Barbara imparted land ethics to the global audience through her.

Garnett Walker and the Revival of Chestnut Trees

The third part of the novel is titled "Chestnut Trees", where Garnett Walker desires to restore the American Chestnut trees decimated by the blight. Garnett's thoughts are preoccupied with his neighbor, Nannie Rawley, her organic farming philosophy, and her disdain for contemporary agricultural practices. Kate Morgan reported that between 1904-1940 3.5 billion chestnut trees succumbed to a fungal blight called *Cryphonectria parasitica* (2021). The population of chestnut trees was colossal during the twentieth century. Now, the chestnut trees population is facing a severe decline. The ultimate objective of Garnett in the novel is to revive the chestnuts through cross-fertilization. Garnett's act of restoring the chestnut trees is laudable. At the same time, his vision to give the chestnut tree species as an inheritance to future generations is highly commendable.

Significance of Chestnut Trees

Garnett's urge to revive the chestnut trees is because of their diverse role in ecology. As S.R. Singh and M.U. Rehman remarks that chestnut trees are widely distributed in European, Asian, and North American regions. However, chestnut trees have suitable climate conditions in many countries. Appalachia had "... more than 884000 acres of chestnut timber" (2019, p.01). According to Jenise M. Bauman et al., American chestnut trees can withstand any ecological conditions, enriching the soil's fertility and alluring seed-dispersing animals.

The yielding of chestnuts is estimated to be around 45kg to 65kg per tree (Singh & Rehman 2019). According to Donald E. Davis, black bears relied on the chestnut trees for food and shelter. Animals and birds that relied on the chestnut trees were affected due to the blight (2005). Additionally, it is a crucial nut in the American diet since it is loaded with dense nutrients. Davis, while mentioning the memories of chestnuts, cited Samuel Detwiler's expression: "Writing in the October 1915 issue of American Forestry, Samuel Detwiler noted that the "finest trees in the world are found in Southern Appalachian Mountains" (Davis 2005)

Knowing the legacy and prominence of the chestnut trees, Garnett stands firm in cross-fertilizing it. An ordinary man's zeal and endeavor in the novel to restore the extinct species (American Chestnut trees) are impeccable. According to Prof. Benjamin Burkhard, a German geographer, "I'm an ecologist and would be happier if people were convinced just by having nice nature and lots of species – but this is not the way the world works at the moment, and usually, the most convincing argument is money" (Willmer 2019). Garnett wanted to restore and bequeath the trees for the future generation. His selfless vision toward the environment is exemplary.

Deanna, Lusa, and Garnett share the same organic aspiration. Their pro-environmental deeds and approaches towards nature motivate the readers to be the true preserver of nature. The vision of Barbara in the novel can bring back the lost nexus with nature, paving the way for ecological restoration. The protagonists are the spokesperson, Barbara. Through them, Barbara bridges the human-nature divide and inculcates environmentally friendly behavior.

CONCLUSION

The study has been analyzed to know the mainsprings of bifurcation. The leading agent of the motivation behind the man-nature split is exhibited in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Prodigal Summer*. Barbara sketches the characters in the novel who are symbiotic with nature, employs green narration, and structured ecocentric plots to bridge the gap between man and the environment. No single solution to converge the human-nature divide is impossible as it requires multiple approaches and implications.

Pro-environmental behavior could succor in finding solutions to the human-nature divide. This approach is believed to tailor the damaged human-nature relationship. This is not a recent approach, so it is evident that there has been a flaw in human behavior while approaching nature long since. Human behavior with nature is cruel and not harmonious. Humans should retract themselves from havoc-causing acts like mining, burning, extracting, over-consuming, overpopulating, and over-polluting. Pro behavioral techniques like recycling, reducing energy consumption, changing transportation modes to reduce the emission of harmful gases, purchasing more environment-friendly products, and any activity that causes no or less harm to the environment.

Primordial man lived in harmony with nature, but modern man is estranged from it. The primitive men lived an epitomic life attuned to nature. This estranged attitude is one of the

reasons for the man-nature split. This damaged perspective must be replaced with pro-environmental attitudes to eliminate the bifurcation. Furthermore, subverting the anthropocentric view that only human beings are prominent could eliminate the dichotomy.

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