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## Cultural Relativism in *The Poisonwood Bible*

Laura Wind, English '08

Cultural relativism embraces the idea that one particular cultural idea varies from one society or societal subgroup to another; therefore, ethical and moral standards are relative to what a particular society or culture believes to be good or bad, or right or wrong. Jack Donnelly, a professor of International Relations at the University of Denver, explains that “[w]hen internal and external judgments of a practice diverge,” an inevitable conflict, “cultural relativists give priority to the internal judgments of a society” (89). Cultural relativism is in contrast to ethnocentrism, the common belief that one’s own culture is superior to all others and, therefore, all cultures should be judged under the same standards that they themselves hold. Many would argue that those who “discovered” America acted on ethnocentric beliefs, driving out Native Americans and trying to convert “savages” to the “correct” Christian ways. Early settlers did not consider that the differences of the Native Americans should be embraced and accepted; consequently, those cultures were almost entirely wiped out. In her novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver explores this same ethnocentric missionary zeal when critiquing the ways in which Western countries relate to “foreign” countries. She creates an allegory where the Price family and the Congolese people are a microcosm of the United States and its relations to “foreign” countries. In this allegory, Kingsolver suggests that the attempt of the U.S. to change what it does not understand can be detrimental and unethical—that the attempt to spread an ethical system becomes the most unethical idea of all.

According to Stephen D. Fox, an English professor at Gallaudet University, “Kingsolver has a highly politicized agenda in *The Poisonwood Bible*. She critiques European and American imperialist policies toward Africa, oppressive patriarchal attitudes toward women, racial oppression in the American South, and alienation cultural assumptions about disabled people” (12). In order to deploy this political agenda, she presents the Price family as symbolic of the western world. The father, Nathan Price, embodies the extreme side of arrogance and ethnocentrism of the United States. As the leader of the family, he represents the U.S. government. He forces the family to stay along the Congo even as they beg him to let them leave, showing the arrogance and stupidity of a government that is purposefully blind to its own corruption. Fox notes, “Price’s extreme obsession, which leads eventually to abandoning his family, to insanity or at least insane behavior, and death is the outcome of his desperate need to maintain his social, gendered, and nationalistic supremacy” (4).

Since Nathan Price reigns over the family as a sort of government system, the children represent the people. As the novel progresses, each of the children reacts differently to Price, illustrating the different ways that western people could react to the corrupt missionary zeal of the government. Unfortunately, Ruth May most likely represents the most common reaction. Young and naïve, Ruth May continues to believe that her father is correct and invincible, and she never sees anything wrong with the work that they are doing; however, Kingsolver suggests that Ruth May cannot be blamed for this belief, and by extension, nor can those who are ignorant about the problems of ethnocentrism. By the end, nevertheless, Ruth May dies for this ignorance. She does not avoid the snakes as one suited to such an environment would, suggesting how dangerous it is to ignorantly impose one’s cultural beliefs in another cultural setting. Leah presents the other side of the spectrum. In the beginning of the novel, she full-heartedly believes in what her father is doing. Of all the family members, she is the character who undergoes the most transformation, for by the end she fully realizes the flaws of her father’s system. Kingsolver is known for presenting “pivotal characters with disabilities who eventually define the relationships of disability to [their culture]” (Fox 1). Kingsolver uses Adah to fill such a role. Adah represents the overall skeptic. She seems wise from the beginning because she realizes that her family is not perfect while recognizing the errors in their voyage. Rachel represents the materialistic aspect of the western culture, whose biggest concerns in realizing such corruption remains mostly self-involved. She is “the only daughter who ‘profits’ from living in Africa—in the greedy capitalistic and very colonial sense” (Wager-Martin 50).

The poisonwood tree also symbolically reinforces the idea of cultural difference and the importance of accepting such differences. The poisonwood tree works on several levels; hence, Kingsolver makes it the primary symbol of the novel. On a concrete and material level, the poisonwood tree is shown as literal misun-

derstanding between the cultures. Mama Tataba, a native motherly woman of the Congolese, warns Nathan Price not to touch the poisonwood because it “bite[s]” (Kingsolver 39). Nathan ignores the warning and “[wakes] up the next morning with a horrible rash on his hands and arms” (Kingsolver 40). Nathan’s ignorance and arrogance causes him a great amount of pain; symbolically, Kingsolver warns the United States that its arrogance could lead to a greater pain.

On a more abstract level, the word poisonwood tree shows up in a linguistic conflict. The Congolese word for “dearly beloved” translates to “bangala,” a word that Nathan uses to reference Jesus; however, the word can easily be confused for “poisonwood tree.” On the surface, it can give Jesus a negative connotation that could make the people resistant about worshipping Jesus, or a poisonous tree. More importantly, it supports the idea of cultural relativism: that both in language and in idea what works for one culture will not necessarily work for another. For the western world, Jesus and Christianity may suit the people’s needs. For the Congolese people, however, the idea of Jesus could actually lead to a moral decline, an idea suggested by the character Anatole, just as the poisonwood tree leads to rashes and pain.

In the novel, nudity symbolically illustrates the dangers of ethnocentrism as well. The Congolese people start with their own belief system about nudity: “They passed back and forth with pots and kettles, all bare-chested and unashamed” (Kingsolver 24-5). Then Nathan Price begins to preach about the evil of nudity: “The emissaries of the Lord smother the sinners, who had come heedless to the sight of God, heedless in their nakedness” (Kingsolver 27). As a result, the people become ashamed of their own nudity: “A few women lifted up their wraparound sarongs and tied them in front, to cover their breasts. Others gathered up their bare-bottomed children and moved out into the darkness” (Kingsolver 28). Here, obviously, Kingsolver makes an overt reference to the Bible. According to the Judeo-Christian creation story, when God created man and woman, nudity was not shameful in the Garden of Eden (Revised Standard Version, Genesis 2:25); however, for Adam and Eve shame was a punishment for disobeying God (Genesis 3:10). Price wants to spread the same punishment to the Congolese. This concept of nudity is a natural one, although not understood as so by most westerners. In the novel, then, nudity represents the state of nature of a particular people. The Congolese had a great quality of appreciating nudity and not associating it with shame. The Price family snatched the gift of their belief and replaced it with shame. But, as Kingsolver dramatizes, converting the beliefs of these people does not improve them, but rather corrupts them because they no longer embrace nature, and even worse, they are ashamed by it.

The election held to decide whether the community wishes to continue learning the lessons of Jesus is an ironic symbol of the differences between the westerners and the Congolese. When Kingsolver writes “Christ lost, eleven to fifty-six” (334), she humorously puts forth that a region should be able to choose its own values instead of being forced into accepting someone else’s. As a response to the election, Tata Ndu makes a speech denouncing the attempted western influence on their culture. He says, “Since the time of our *mankulu* we have made our laws without help from white men...” (Kingsolver 333). Despite popular belief, Christianity is not suited for every region, and in this novel could serve as a moral decline rather than an improvement to the society. The laws of these people are part of what defines their culture, and by replacing their laws with Christian-based laws, these people could lose what makes them who they are. The scene is ironic, of course, because western countries believe in democratic values and yet it is the Congolese, not the western Price family, who are democratic.

The scene with the driver ants is the most symbolic one depicting the clash between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism because it shows that not only is everything *not* the same, but *should not* be the same. The Price family viewed the infestation as horrifying, whereas the Congolese people saw the arrival of the ants as a good thing. They thought the ants purified the area giving them a clean slate for when they return after the infestation. Furthermore, the Congolese accept the ants for the way they act, whereas the Price family is appalled by their savagery. Anatole says, “Don’t blame God for what ants have to do. We all get hungry. Congolese people are not so different from Congolese ants” (Kingsolver 308). Anatole is better suited for his environment as he accepts the actions of the ants and appreciates them. He continues, “When they are pushed down long enough they will rise up. If they bite you, they are trying to fix things the only way they know how” (Kingsolver 308). Anatole is trying to explain that the missionaries are pushing the Congolese down just as the ants are pushed down, and that the result of ethnocentrism can be devastating.

The entirety of *The Poisonwood Bible* is a series of microcosms through which Kingsolver advances her political agenda—that the practice of ethnocentrism is destructive and that cultural relativism is a more enlightened concept. In the novel, she portrays a western world and a *foreign* world in a different light than most westerners are accustomed: in a light of equality. As shocking and unsettling as unfamiliar rituals and characteristics can be, Kingsolver suggests that one must not only tolerate them, but ultimately accept them. There is no foreigner, we are the same: human beings suited to their surroundings and doing their best to survive.

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