

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment through Learning in the Appalachian Setting of Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

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Abstract: The research will study the crucial role of women in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Prodigal Summer* and focuses on characters like Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie. The study will analyze the gender inequality encountered by women while trying to strive to save the integrity of crops as they use the organic fertilizers and sustainable agricultural practices to save the Earth. This reflects a profound commitment of women to nurture and preserve the soil and land. Their environmental awareness extends to conserving wildlife, notably their efforts to save coyotes from extinction, this highlights the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of biodiversity. Through an ecofeminist lens, the paper scrutinizes how the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are interlinked, both rooted in patriarchal structures that the female characters vigorously oppose. The research will analyze how these women are empowered in the phase of being suppressed and emerge as empowered women with vitality in acting as stewards in conserving the environment. The discussion will address how the actions of these women align with key United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of gender equality in particular. It captures the wilderness and complexity of the Appalachian ecosystem, the article illustrates how Kingsolver's narrative champions female stewardship and sustainable development as essential to ecological and social renewal.

Keywords: *Appalachian region; Barbara Kingsolver; coyotes; Gender Equality; Organic farming; Prodigal summer; Sustainable Development goals.*

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Introduction

Ecofeminism is a distinct branch of feminism that challenges all forms of domination, which includes the subjugation of women by men, and highlights how these power hierarchies are interconnected and affect both people and the natural world. Ecofeminists argue that opposing patriarchy inherently means opposing the destruction of the Earth, as both forms of domination are interconnected. Merchant (1996) claims that people of all genders can join efforts to save the environment to meet crucial human needs, and that the Earth is home to countless living and non-living beings, many of which possess unique beauty and inspiration. From the perspective of Gaard (1993) "Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature" (1). Sturgeon (1997) states that ecofeminism is a movement that links environmentalism and feminism, asserting that the ideologies justifying injustice based on gender, race, and class are fundamentally connected to those that enable the exploitation and degradation of the environment. Mellor (2000) articulates the link between female subordination and environmental oppression,

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the natural world and women's subordination and oppression of

women...Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements while simultaneously offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world, and from feminism, the view of humanity as gendered in a way that subordinate, exploit, and oppress women. (Mellor, 2000, p. 1)

Ecofeminism not only critiques the intertwined oppressions of women and nature but also highlights the vital roles women play in conserving sustainable community practices. Literature, too, has become a powerful medium to explore and embody the ecofeminist themes, which offers nuanced portrayals of women's relationships with the natural world and their opposition to ecological and social injustices. Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, is often regarded as her magnum opus, this embodies her notions through its setting in the Appalachian Mountains and its focus on women whose lives are deeply interlinked with the land. The narrative weaves together three interlinked storylines which investigate environmental and human relationships in Eastern North America. Deanna Wolfe, a forest ranger, who dedicates herself to protect the returning coyotes and navigates a complex relationship with Eddie Bondo, a much younger rancher. Lusa Landowski, who after the sudden demise of her husband, must opt between whether to continue as a tobacco farmer or pursue more sustainable, eco-

friendly practices with goats. Nannie Rawley, a staunch advocate of organic farming, frequently clashes with her neighbour Garnett Walker, who is in favour of chemical pesticides. Through these characters, Kingsolver examines themes of conservation, sustainable agriculture, and opposition to environmentally harmful norms, underscoring women's critical role to defend nature and to challenge prevailing attitudes in Appalachian society.

Rodríguez (2023) shows how transnational ecological challenges restructure regional farming cultures in Turtle Valley and *Prodigal Summer*, as both novels advocate for sustainable coexistence amid environmental harm caused by industrial and agricultural practices. Cappelli (2017) highlights the environmental importance of coyotes as keystone predators and examines how Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* and Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* use narrative to critique the political and environmental aftermaths of predator removal. Fraser (2014) states that the novel provides a nuanced literary view on rural studies by interlinking ecological themes and the tensions between agriculture and sustainability within its interconnected stories. Cavalcanti Novaes (2004) in her thesis states that in *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver's female protagonists challenge patriarchal societies and economic dependency and claims independence in traditionally male-dominated rural spaces, which draws on ecofeminist principles.

McConnell and Saladyga (2019) portray the forest as a contested space where competing interests such as preservation, timber extraction, and economic needs intersect, the use of multiple narrative views to underscore the complexity of land uses. McIntyre (2023) examines how *Prodigal Summer* uses zoomorphism to blur gender binaries and challenge essentialist views, while also applies Gumbrecht's theory of presence to dissolve boundaries between humans and nature. Hirsch (2014) depicts how *Prodigal Summer* and *All Over Creation* use ecofeminist views and scientific evidence to critique ecological degradation and gender oppression, which advocates for ecological and gender justice. Ali and Sasani (2024) argue that ecofeminism connects women's liberation with ecological justice, which shows how Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* and *Prodigal Summer* shows how female protagonists forging deep bonds with nature as a form of opposition to patriarchal oppression.

Methods

This research employs ecofeminist theory, where women are subjugated by the patriarchal society just like how the nature is subjugated as well. From the perspective of Puleo, "The modern capitalist development model, based on technology and economics, insatiably drives us towards competitiveness and the search for unrestrained riches, which stems from the old desire for patriarchal power. This results in a model that at present not only punishes several groups, such as women, but also makes it unsustainable in the long term" (Puleo 2017, p. 1). The research will investigate the instances experienced by the women that aligns with SDG 5 (Gender Equality). The research will also explore the ways and means women take up the environmental stewardship by intertwined relationship with nature.

Results and Discussion

Women's Environmental Stewardship and Its Resonance with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5)

As Deanna reflects on her divorce and the ways her skills and preferences were considered unworthy by her ex-husband, this

highlights the gender inequalities embedded in patriarchal societies. She states, "that name is nothing to me now, but it's still yet stuck all over my life" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 28), this shows how women's identities have historically been defined by men. This aligns with SDG 5's goal which assures women's autonomy and recognition, as Deanna seeks to reaffirm her identity beyond marital ties. Her journey reflects the empowerment of women to identify themselves on their own terms, free from patriarchal restrictions. Her life she led in the mountains, is marked by loneliness and independence, demonstrates her opposition, societal expectations that women must be described through relationships with men. She enjoys her freedom by caring for her body and lives without judgment exemplifies SDG 5's stress on women's empowerment and independence. She illustrates that women's agency and value are not contingent on male companionship, but on their own experiences and choices. She challenges assumptions about women's relationships and asks, "Why does everybody assume boyfriend when a girl and a guy are friends?" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 254). This directly critiques the gender stereotypes that limit women's social roles and independence. She opposes to be defined by romantic links mirrors SDG 5's aim to eliminate harmful stereotypes and ensures women's equal participation in life. She claims her independence in both work and personal relationships, She models empowerment and challenges against restrictive norms. Her ability to appreciate loneliness and the natural world illustrates how women's views enrich ecological stewardship and social life. This aligns with SDG 5's aim of identifying and valuing women's contributions, which ensures that women's voices are not marginalized but celebrated.

Lusa Maluf Landowski who was recently widowed after Cole Widener's tragic death, encounters the dual challenge of sorrow and negotiates her identity in a patriarchal rural society. Her plight mirrors SDG 5's call to abolish discrimination against women, as she is pressured to leave her home and stays voiceless in her marriage. Despite this, Lusa asserts her autonomy, this exemplifies the goal that women must have equal rights to property, resources, and decision-making. Her denial to leave the farm, "But why should I go home if you're all staying here?" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 75) is a direct act of resistance against gendered expectations, which affirms her entitlement to remain and engage fully in community life. Cole's failure to support Lusa and his sisters' ridicules embody the systemic silencing of women's voices. Even after his death, Lusa gets ostracized, as seen when she is addressed as "Mrs. Widener" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 43), in spite of keeping her maiden name. Her identity erasure mirrors patriarchal practices that deny women of autonomy and parallels SDG 5's stress which ensures women's full participation and recognition in both private and public spheres. Lusa embraces the "wildness and beauty of the honeysuckle," which is dismissed as a weed by her community, symbolizes her ecofeminist views that values nature beyond utility. Her appreciation of bees and the Io moth, when dismissed by others, parallels the devaluation of women's knowledge in patriarchal society. Through her innovative farming practices, like keeping the cow with her calf overnight to lowers women's labour, she shows how women's expertise leads to more humane and sustainable solutions. This aligns with SDG 5's goal of identifying and valuing women's contributions to economic and ecological stewardship. When Cole ridicules of urban lifestyles, "you can take the girl out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the girl" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 38) this shows his insecurity and highlights rural-urban divides. Lusa counters by insisting intellectual engagement with nature and advocates for

inclusivity in environmental stewardship. This reflects SDG 5's principle which ensures women's equal participation across diverse contexts, whether rural or urban, and challenges stereotypes that limit women's roles.

Nannie Rawley's identity as an unmarried woman, raising a child on her own directly challenges patriarchal societies expectations of women's roles in rural Appalachia. Her denial to be shamed or silenced reflects SDG 5's goal to eradicate discrimination against women and girls. Kingsolver defines her as "working in darkness like the witch she was, to move her sign over onto Garnett" (2000, p. 87), a metaphor for her opposition against male-dominated society and her claim of agency. Nannie's opposes the chemical usage and advocates for organic methods shows a direct challenge to male-dominated, industrial agriculture. Her hand-painted "NO SPRAY ZONE" sign (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 86) is both a literal and symbolic act of opposition, asserts her right to make decisions about land guardianship. This aligns with SDG 5's stress and ensures women's equal participation in leadership and decision-making, particularly in environmental and agricultural contexts. Her activism illustrates how women's voices can restructure community practice towards sustainability. Kingsolver explains Nannie in earthy, natural terms, "all rosy-cheeked amongst her daisies with her long calico skirt and braids wrapped around her head like some storybook Gretel" (2000, p. 85). While her community reject her as eccentric, this imagery roots her in the land and underscores her nurturing yet defiant presence. Her embodiment of ecofeminist ideals, where she lives in harmony with nature despite patriarchal disapproval, demonstrates SDG 5's call towards empowering women to challenge stereotypes and redefine social norms. Her role as "the sworn friend and protector of all creatures great and small" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 88) exemplifies SDG 5's principle of identifying and valuing women's contributions to sustainable development.

Women Empowerment through Learning

Deanna balances her home and its relationship with the wild and embraces both challenges and joys of living lonely with nature. Her acts of feeding birds, observing coyotes, and respecting even the mice, shows how learning from the environment empowers women to nurture and protect nature. When she finds the coyote at the end of the chapter, she says, "Not human, not raccoon. Coyote" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 69), this depicts her ability to read and interpret the natural world. Deanna's ecological knowledge is seen as both scientific and experiential. She reminisces her father's way of imparting her to hunt morels, "Her dad had taught her to hunt them in mid-May when oak leaves were the size of squirrels' ears. Even the ravenous will of Eddie Bondo couldn't make one appear in the third week of June" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 190-191). This moment shows how learning across generations empowers women to respect natural cycles and oppose exploitation. Her resistance to harvest out of season mirrors restraint and wisdom and shows that empowerment through learning is not about domination but about being informed of ethical choices. Deanna's actions which includes repairing trails, safeguarding coyote pups, and honouring the cycles of nature, shows how learning fosters humility and patience. Kingsolver observes, "The hardest work of Deanna's life had been staying away from that den, protecting it with her absence" (2000, p. 203). This reveals how her empowerment comes from understanding that protection sometimes means restraint. Her learning allows her to

act not as a controller of nature but as a respectful guardian, which models how women's knowledge can alter ecological relationships.

Lusa's struggle for autonomy gets exposed when she reflects, "I'm supposed to go down there and apologize for my rash attempt at self-rule and beg them on bended knee to come set my tobacco" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 149). These lines insist the gendered expectations which women face in local communities, where independence gets mostly punished. Yet this moment also mirrors empowerment through learning, as Lusa starts to recognize how patriarchal and economic interests subjugate women's voices. Her innovative idea to grow alternative crops instead of tobacco, which acknowledges its health hazards reveals how women's knowledge can challenge destructive traditions. She understands "She saw she was being punished: the tobacco had been their idea, and now they were using it against her" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 149), this shows how learning empowers her to see through entrenched power structures and imagine sustainable alternatives. Lusa's journey is to question inherited practices and to imagine new possibilities. She is open to alternatives, "Well, I hadn't really thought. What about corn?" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 108) this shows how learning empowers women to be adaptive and innovative, even under economic pressure. Her endurance to seek alternatives, her care for cherry trees, and her collaboration with Jewel while canning fruits all shows how shared learning fosters resilience. "She'd been relieved when Jewel offered over the phone to come up and help her finish the canning" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 111) this line reflects how mutual aid and domestic labour become sites of empowerment, where women exchange knowledge and maintain community together.

Nannie Rawley is portrayed as a female guardian whose resilience and knowledge empower her to renew and protect her land through organic means. Even when Garnett ridicules her, the narrative acknowledges her expertise, "The organic-certification men probably called up Nannie Rawley for advice" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 88). This recognition exposes how learning empowers women to lead in environmental renewal, even when their authority is interrogated. Her capacity to transform knowledge into practice shows how women's education formal or experiential turns out into a source of empowerment and resilience. Nannie's guardianship is not only practical but deeply innovative. She cleverly manages her orchard with scientific skills, patents new apple varieties, and adapts biodiversity and encourages wild "accidental crosses" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 273). Her openness to experiment with new methods exposes how learning empowers women to be innovate and regenerate ecosystems. Her success in growing crops without using chemicals reflects the transformative power of knowledge which she applies with creativity and care. Nannie's environmental renewal is rooted in long-term vision and responsibility. The author observes, "Those trees wouldn't start to bear apples for another ten years. Who did she think would be around to pick them?" (Kingsolver, 2000, p. 273). This reflects how learning empowers women to transcend immediate gains, and foster intergenerational stewardship. Her commitment towards biodiversity and future harvests exemplifies empowerment through foresight, which reveals that women's knowledge sustains communities across time.

Conclusion

Deanna's journey in *Prodigal Summer* demonstrates how women's empowerment through learning is central to environmental renewal and gender equality. Her knowledge on

natural cycles, reflective practices, and her stewardship of wildlife reveals that learning equips women with agency, resilience, and authority. She values her own insights and resists patriarchal definitions of her identity, she exemplifies the principle that women's education whether formal or experiential empowers leads them in both ecological and social spheres. Lusa's journey in *Prodigal Summer* demonstrates how women's empowerment through learning is central to environmental renewal and gender equality. She reflects on patriarchal suppression, her ancestral links, openness to alternatives, and her collaborative practices all reveal that learning equips women with agency, resilience, and authority. Nannie Rawley's character in *Prodigal Summer* demonstrates how women's empowerment through learning alters environmental and social landscapes. Her opposition, healing practices, scientific experimentation, and long-term vision all illustrate that women's knowledge is central to renewal and sustainability. She values her insights and denies to conform to the norms of the patriarchal society. Nannie exemplifies the principle that women's education whether rooted in science, tradition, or creativity empowers them to lead as guardians of both land and community.

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