

**WOMEN AND NATURE: AN ECOFEMINIST
STUDY OF THE NOVELS OF BARBARA
KINGSOLVER AND RUTH OZEKI**

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Chapter Five

Conclusion

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination.

(Reuther 204).

In the course of the recent study of the novels of Barbara Kingsolver and Ruth Ozeki, what is clear from the beginning is that the two writers share most of their perspectives as ecofeminists. Both are of the same nation and sex. However, the fact that one is White American (Kingsolver) and the other one is Japanese American (Ruth Ozeki) does not cause any huge differences in their stands and ideas. Both writers show their concerns about issues of contemporary times, they are interested about matters related to the lives of human beings in general and their interconnectedness to their environmental world with a specific focus given to women, a tendency that should not be considered to be essentialist as it has been revealed through the deep readings of their works. Unlike other feminist writers, their writings are not concerned only about issues of women, their never-ending struggles against tormenting and oppressive men, rather their interests go beyond the feminist framework embracing those issues of the environmental world.

Barbara Kingsolver and Ruth Ozeki have undeniably made an indelible mark on the history of ecofeminist thought. The thorough analyses of the novels of these two writers have reflected how for both human life and the environmental world should never be dealt with as two independent realms, rather they should be

considered in terms of one entity, a principle that lies at the very center of the ecofeminist thought which highlights the interconnectedness of all forms of life. As ecofeminism is chiefly a branch of feminism, or as referred to by some scholars and theorists as the third wave of feminism, it puts more emphasis upon women's sense of connection to the environmental world. However, their concern about women's issues go in equal terms with their interest in issues of other dominated groups.

Barbara Kingsolver and Ruth Ozeki, through their writings, try to subvert all the traditional notions of patriarchy that limit women's roles to the domestic sphere of life proving that women can occupy more efficient and effective roles and are capable of challenging and overcoming all those limitations predetermined and imposed on them by patriarchal ideologies. Women have the potentials to occupy places that are considered as stereotypical for men. A woman can be a social activist like Codi and Hallie of Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* or a wildlife ranger like Deana of *Prodigal Summer* or an environmental activist like Yummy of Ozeki's *All Over Creation*. However, as ecofeminists, both writers believe that man's domination over women is not the only power threatening women, rather other forces of oppression and subjugation, should be also taken into consideration as they have their direct impacts upon women. Imperialism, colonization, capitalism, religion, science and technology, are among those hegemonic patriarchal powers, realms that have been referred to throughout the discussion of this thesis.

The analysis of the novels selected for this thesis has shown that there exists a sense of affinity between the two writers. This sense of affinity has been referred to by Ruth Ozeki herself when interviewed by Eleanor Ty, she says, "I think I feel a little bit part of an Asian American group and a little bit a part of environmental

writers, like Barbara Kingsolver—I feel an affinity there—definitely an affinity with Asian American and Asian Canadian writers” (165).

Being ecofeminists, both writers are preoccupied with the idea of interconnectedness. The general level of such connectedness is on the level of human life and the environmental world. Referring to the main issues in Kingsolver’s works Patti Capel Swartz writes:

Environmental issues connected with our use of the earth, United States policy in Central America, the sanctuary movement, treatment of and beliefs of Native American people, discrimination against Hispanic or Latino/Latina Americans, family relationships, women's control of their own lives, and people organizing in order to create a community in which action is possible(65).

As issues of sexual violence against women is one of the matters that feminists seek to end, ecofeminists argue that these behaviours against women are nothing but reflections of similar acts of violence practiced against animals. Patriarchy should not be understood to be limited to man’s oppression of women. Man’s patriarchal oppressive behaviours against women are inherently caused by his oppression of animals. Sexual violence against women can never be brought to an end unless humans change the way they interact with their surrounding environment, replace their ideology of violence and hostility with an ideology of love and cooperation. In this regard, according to Ozeki, capitalism is a patriarchal power nourishing all acts of violence against animals and nature. Ozeki’s ideas about sexual violence against women mirror those views presented by Carol J. Adams in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meats* portraying meat as a point of intersection between

women an animals. As animals are transformed into meat to be consumed by humans, similarly women are viewed as nothing but meat for the sexual fulfilment of man in patriarchal societies. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* is abundant with scenes of sexual violence practiced by a husband, Mr. Uno, on his wife, Akiko. At the same time, other scenes of violence against animals in slaughterhouses are provided throughout the novel. Here Ozeki suggests that acts of sexual violence against woman are mainly nourished through violent behaviours practiced against animals. Therefore, for putting an end to man's sexual violence against women, man should first rebuild his relationship with nature. A relationship of hostility and violence should be replaced by a relationship of love and respect. However, Kingsolver's perspective is different from that of Ozeki in the sense that she is not against killing animals. She is against the killing of keystone animals like coyotes. While Ozeki is a veg ecofeminist, Kingsolver is not. She shows no objections against killing animals as long as that the absence of that animal does not negatively affect biological diversity.

Among all issues presented in Kingsolver and Ozeki, it is observed that technology-related ones have received the greatest attention on the part of the two writers. Technology is introduced as one of the most dangerous weapons of patriarchy posing a threat to human life and the world of nature. While Ozeki presents challenges of technology through her portrayal of DES hormone, its use as a miscarriage preventive hormone for women and also as a growth accelerator in meat industry, Kingsolver's focus is on the use of chemicals and pesticides in agriculture. Kingsolver and Ozeki's idea is that the use of synthetic hormones and chemicals in agriculture and in medicine affects human health leading to fatal diseases like cancer. Not only this, they might even turn women sterile. In the same manner, the application of technology for agricultural purposes leads to the land losing its fertility.

The similarity between the effects of technology on women and its impacts upon the land adds to the ecofeminist argument of the connection between women and nature. It is this kind of women's vulnerability to environmental toxins that has been the focus of Kingsolver and Ozeki in their narratives. Ozeki's position against modern practices in the fields of agriculture and farming processes is motivated by the fact that she lost her mother due to a tumor. Her belief in technology as a power of patriarchy is further suggested through the name she gives to her second novel, *All Over Creation* implying that technology can cause destruction of the whole creation.

The analysis of the novels of the two writers' shows that they have reflections from Shiva's concept of the link between gender and diversity, a concept which indicates that failure to cope with relations with the environmental world has its own reflections upon our failure to cope with differences among each other and vice versa. Lusa of Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* and Yummy of Ozeki's *All Over Creation* are oppressed by their patriarchal societies. They are both treated as belonging to the second sex. Lusa is oppressed by her husband and his family through their attempts to convince her to dispense with all her cultural beliefs and backgrounds. Attempts are even performed to force her adopt her husband's name instead of her own maiden one. The same society which shows its failure to cope with the differences between men and women is also showing failure to cope with the difference between the human world and the environmental world. Consequently, parallel to all the forms of oppression to which Lusa is exposed comes the society's fight against other forms of natural life such as the attempts to bring all the predators into extinction. Like Lusa, Yummy of *All over Creation* is sexually abused by her teacher and later on forced by him to abort the baby. In parallel to all the forms of tough treatments shown towards Yummy comes her own community's surrender to the projects of corporations and

their application of genetic engineering methods for their agricultural purposes which finally leads to nothing but monoculture products.

Kingsolver and Ozeki are among today's fictional authors who have been inspired by the latest developments in the realm of biotechnology and also in the field of food industry. Through their works, they ask prominent questions about the health, ecological, political, and ethical issues brought about by bioengineering. Kingsolver expresses her views in favour of traditional techniques of plant growing. For instance, in her essay, "A Fist in the Eye of God", she speaks about the difference between traditional methods of agriculture and modern methods of agriculture through genetic engineering. She writes, "I've heard less knowledgeable people comfort themselves on the issue of genetic engineering by recalling that humans have been pushing genes around for centuries, through selective breeding of livestock and crops. I even heard one howler of a quote that began, "Ever since Mendel spliced those first genes. . ." (102). Here, Kingsolver's reference is to Gregor Mendel, the Austrian monk who used to keep watching the different kinds of pea keep growing naturally, "he simply watched peas to know how their natural system of genetic recombination worked" (102). Unlike, natural methods of food growing, bioengineers select one gene from one specific favored plant inserting it into another plant of a completely different species. In the opinion of Kingsolver, the Americans' ignorance about issues of food security can be attributed to some problems with the American school system and its lack of sufficient scientific information. In some American states, theory of evolution has been banned from the school syllabus as it does not go in parallel with the Christian views of creation. Ruth Ozeki's concerns and fears about genetic engineering are shown through her second novel *All Over Creation*, through one of the characters, Geek, "genetic engineering are trying to force alien words into the

plant's poem, but we've got a problem. We barely know the root language. Genetic grammar's a mystery and our engineers are just one click up the evolutionary ladder from s roomful of monkeys, typing random sonnets on a bank typewriters" (15).

Another point of meeting between Kingsolver and Ozeki is in regard to their views in matters of relationships human beings should have with their surrounding environmental world, how people should view their relationship to their world. The ecofeminist concept of relational self carries within it associating oneself with home which in turn has associations with the land. Kingsolver's novels reflect her appreciation for the Native Americans' perspective towards the land. Viewing it as "an organic entity that supports communal identity" (Rubenstein 41). In an interview, she says, "I think biology is my religion. Understanding the processes of the natural world and how all living things are related is the way that I answer those questions that are the basis of religion... [T]he Christian creation myth, which says the world was put here as a little garden for us to use, goes a long way in explaining how we've really devastated that garden" (Rubenstein 42). Kingsolver's perception of the land is the reflection of her being influenced by the Native Americans' views about the land. *Animal Dreams* shows Kingsolver's belief in the intertwining between personal memory, communal memory and the memory of the land meaning that Codi can find her 'self' only if she connects herself to her personal memory, the memory of her community and also the memory of the land. The simultaneous introduction of the inside disease of Mr. Homer, the inside disease of Codi and that disease of the land. Such connection allusively links the situation to the narrative depicted in *The Wasteland* by T.S Eliot and its antecedent King Fisher where the sterility of the King reflects the inability of the land's to flourish. Codi's inner suffering is reflected

through the sterility of the land and also in her sense of lacking "ground orientation" which results from her disconnection from the land.

As ecofeminists, Kingsolver and Ozeki reveal that the origin of women's suffering cannot be attributed only to the social circumstances women endure but also to those circumstances affecting the world of the environment, specifically to factors related to science and technology, their intervention in the various fields of human beings' lives particularly to the field of women's production and fertility. The novels of the two writers represent an integration of the fundamental aspects of the American society, of the American policies of curbing cultures and all forms of biological diversity. Despite the different cultural backgrounds of the two writers as one is a Native American and the other is a Japanese American, both portray how women within American societies struggle for subverting all forms of oppression inflicted upon them and the world of Nature. Women in the works of both writers escape the oppression of their societies and all the forms of patriarchal domination embracing nature and uniting their aims with those aims of the natural world. Both writers present technology as one of the most destructive weapons misused by new science and in the name of development to destroy the lives of women and to negatively affect the sustainability of the environment. While Kingsolver presents such technological intervention in the field of agriculture as shown through *Prodigal Summer*, Ruth Ozeki draws a more expanded view for such destructive technological powers with her presentation of animal industry as another means for technological manipulation of women's lives.

Both writers connect the productivity of the land to the productivity and fertility of women viewing modern technology as a destructive power affecting the interconnectedness between human beings and their natural world. In addition, for

both, food is viewed as one of the tools through which technology practices domination upon the life of human beings. In a like manner, they show that through technology, food is transformed from a source of nutrition to a medium for poisoning the human bodies. Instead of being a medium for reducing the distance between human beings and nature, food now turns to a tool of separation

Barbara Kingsolver's and Ozeki's approaches regarding the influence of technology upon the health of women in the three novels , *Prodigal Summer*, *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* should not be understood as belonging to the affinity branch of ecofeminism which "assumes an essential affinity between women and nature (Ladino 134). In other words, both writers do not view such relationship as essentialist, as based on some physiological or psychic commonalities between women and nature. The approach they adopt in the above mentioned novels regarding the connection between the exploitation, oppression and subordination of women and nature can be interpreted as 'contingent', an approach according to which "The juxtaposition and the subordination of women and nature has occurred at a particular historical juncture, western patriarchal capitalism/industrialism. If women understand 'nature' it is because of their common experience of exploitation" (Mellor 148). The two writers do not limit the negative impacts of technology only to women as the three novels present men and children as showing vulnerability to such impacts. In the same manner, struggle for the justice of human beings and the environment is also presented on the level of men. For example, *All Over Creation* presents the resistance against the process of genetic modification of potatoes to be held by a group of men activists called the Seeds of Resistance. In the same manner, the novel makes references to women's efforts for saving the environment as shown through the three women, Yummy, Momoko and Lilith. Human beings in general are vulnerable to

serious health hazards which might result from their consumption of DES injected meats. Ozeki, however, puts more emphasis upon the dangers of DES injected meats on the health of women. There are situations in the novel where references are also made to how males can be also negatively affected through their consumption of DES injected meats. For example, the novel shows how such products might render male human beings “effeminate or impotent” (Wallace, *Novel Ecologies* 81). In one situation in the novel, a toddler is shown with overdeveloping breasts and pubic hair as a result of his exposure to antibiotics. Lara, one of the show’s guests, reports, “sperm counts have dropped by about fifty percent in the past fifty years” (*My Year of Meats* 197). Lara’s partner, Dyann, says, “Recent studies show that today the average man produces fewer morphologically normal sperm than your average hamster” (*My Year of Meats* 178). Such references play a major role in distancing Ozeki’s arguments in the novel from being essentialist. What she simply wants to convey is that women show deeper vulnerability to all the various forms of the degradation of the environmental world. Their vulnerability stems from the fact of their being the nurturers of their families and the ones upon whose shoulders lies the future of next generations.

Kingsolver and Ozeki criticize the ethnocentric ideologies of the Americans towards other nations. Such views are clearly presented through Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* and Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* with the former focusing on the American’s colonization of the Congo and their attempts towards the erasure of the Congolese culture and *My Year of Meats* focusing on the Americans’ efforts to erase the Japanese culture through food, with a particular focus upon meat industry. In other words, the two writers’ novels give a warning against ethnocentrism and an invitation towards cultural relativism. On the other hand, both writers relate such ethnocentric

ideologies to certain ideologies and practices that humans have towards their environmental worlds.

Another similarity between Ozeki and Kingsolver is related to their understanding of food culture which they consider not as something to be imposed upon; rather as something coming out of people. In *My Year of Meats*, Ozeki clarifies this point through the reference to the efforts of imposing American food culture upon the Japanese through media. Kingsolver shares the same point. In *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, she writes, “A food culture is not something that gets sold to people. It arises out of a place, a soil, a climate, a history, a temperament, a collective sense of belonging. Every set of fad- diet rules is essentially framed in the negative, dictating what you must give up” (17). They both draw analogies between issues related to food production and women reproduction and sexuality with *My Year of Meats* focusing on food production in the field of beef industry, *All Over Creation* and *Prodigal Summer* focusing on food production in the field of agriculture suggesting that maintenance of environmental justice and diversity is the only method through which reproductive justice can be preserved.

Kingsolver and Ozeki direct their works towards the criticism of American culture. To both, American culture is detrimental mainly founded upon bringing other cultures into complete destruction. Such concerns are noticed specifically through *The Poisonwood Bible* and *My Year of Meats*. While *The Poisonwood Bible* reflects Kingsolver’s belief in religion as a domineering force of other cultures, *My Year of Meats* shows food as a means the Americans use for controlling other cultures. Within the narratives of these two novels, the two writers portray series of issues related to the environmental world and the human world, how such tendencies of repression are to be blamed for all those acts of oppression. As cultural ecofeminists believe that

culture defines the manners human beings behave towards their fellow human beings as well as towards their environment, Kingsolver portrays the Western culture as one built upon domination with Christianity as a weapon applied for achieving such goals. The narrative draws a complete and clear picture reflecting on the ecofeminist principle of the interconnectedness of all issues of life showing how political issues can interfere with religious and social ones and how such matters might lead to suffering and even to death. Mr. Nathan, the American missionary in the Congo, in the name of religion, practices all forms of violence and subjugation towards all his family members, the Congolese as well as towards the environment. Kingsolver's presentation of feminist issues through the suffering of the missionary's daughters is done along with her presentation of environmental problems as well suggesting Kingsolver's belief that both cannot be dealt with in isolation from each other. Religious fundamentalism as a force of oppression is also presented in Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* through the character of Garnett with his beliefs in the rights of humans to dominate the earth and so he thinks that using herbicides and insecticides on his farm has no consequences.

In parallel to their emphasis upon the major role of biodiversity is the two writers' emphasis upon the importance of cultural diversity in the lives of people. They both adopt the philosophy that human social systems and the ecosystems should be understood as analogous in their structure and as subject to the same ethical imperatives" (Heise 394). Furthermore, both writers are known for their appreciation of diversity and their perspective of the destruction of diversity as a damaging force for the ecological world and also as a major factor leading to hazardous consequences upon the social structures of nations. Though the analogy between biodiversity and cultural diversity is presented in all the works by the two writers, their two novels

Prodigal Summer and *All Over Creation* can be considered as the most representative of the meeting between the two apparently different realms of diversity. Such parallelism is suggested through the introduction of ethnic Americans within the White American communities; Ozeki presents the Japanese-American Yummy while Kingsolver presents Lusa whose mother is from the Middle East while her father is Polish. Both are daughters of first-generation immigrants. The two women lead a life of suffering within their communities because of their diverse cultural background. Their cultural diversity is considered as eccentric. However, Kingsolver and Ozeki view such diversity as valuable to the two girls' communities. Its significance is suggested through the reference to another level of diversity; the diversity of the natural world. As soil is enriched by the growth of variety of crops, similarly communities acquire great benefits through embracing diverse cultural groups. While homogeneity produces weakness, diversity creates strength. Such references to the connection between biodiversity and cultural diversity further emphasize the two writers' belief in the ecofeminist perspective of the connection between the human world and the environmental world. Upon her arrival as a wife to the rural Kentucky, Lusa is faced with a number of cultural conflicts. The first of such conflicts is regarding changing her name to her husband's name. Being of a totally different cultural background, Lusa shows her objections to such cultural traditions and instead continues her life forcefully refusing to be addressed by any other name but her.

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Ozeki’s novels aim at revealing the suffering of Japanese-Americans living in America. According to her, being of a different racial background exposes the Japanese-Americans to various forms of oppression. Her identity as a mixed-race has a great influence upon her writing as it helps her in enriching her writing as well as provides her with a much broader perspective about the world. Referring to the impact of her mixed cultural background, Oseki says, “It affects everything about my writing. I always write a mixed race character. I like writing from that perspective because it’s neither here nor there; it gives me a broader palette. I feel that coming from two cultures is hugely enriching. My entire life has been lived in this kind of duality; Japanese-American, everything is influenced by duality” (Shaheen “Neither here nor there”, 1). The influence of her cultural roots is particularly shown through her presentation of Japanese-American women in her novels. As an example, in her first novel *My Year of Meats*, she presents Jane’s mother who was injected with the DES hormone during her pregnancy as a prescription from the doctor based on his claim that her racial background makes her more vulnerable to miscarriage, a situation that later on resulted to her giving birth to a daughter having a cervical cancer and being

infertile. In this regard, Harrison Summer, writes that Jane at the end of the novel comes to the realization that her infertility was “caused not through meat consumption, but through the gendered racial stereotypes that rendered her mother exceptionally vulnerable to prescribed DES” 464).

Both writers show their advocacy on behalf of local food, environmental and social justice. Such a trend of their writing goes along with those invitations made by other ecofeminists for the reestablishment of “local communities,” or “local foodsheds that have been effectively erased by industrial production” (Bunthoff 132). Through their works, Kingsolver and Ozeki demonstrate the fundamentality of food to life. Much more significant is the fact that through their writings, the two writers provide the foundation for understanding the significance of local foods as a form of resistance against the power of globalized industrial foodways. This special feature of these two writers writings is the outcome of the their realization and deep recognition of food interrelatedness with culture and its effective role towards a better and deep understanding of human society and culture.

Investigating the main factors shaping the Americans’ oppressive relationship with their surrounding nature as well as other nations, Kingsolver and Ozeki find the answer through the American culture. To both, American culture is intrinsically detrimental as it is mainly founded upon attempts towards the eradication of other cultures. These concerns are noticed specifically through *The Poisonwood Bible* and *My Year of Meats*. While *The Poisonwood Bible* reflects Kingsolver’s belief in religion as a domineering force of other cultures, *My Year of Meats* shows food as a means the Americans use for controlling other cultures. Within the narratives of these two novels, the two writers portray series of issues related to the environmental world and the human world, how such tendencies of repression are to be blamed for all those

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