

Ecological Crisis in Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*

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Abstract: Grace is faced with the deterioration of the environment. Codi Homero Noline, the protagonist begins to devote herself to the local environmental justice movement which aims to confirm the equality between mankind and nature, and the equal access to natural resources for the sake of sustainable development in the community. By educating her students about the seriousness of the ecological crisis she works with her town people for cultural activism and finally succeeds in winning the fight for environmental justice. This paper is an attempt to analyse the ecological crisis in the novel *Animal Dreams*.

Keywords: Ecological Crisis, Cultural Activism

Introduction: Barbara Kingsolver emerged in the American literary scenario during the 1980's. Throughout the three decades of her literary career she has followed the progressive social conscience of her times. Her thematic concerns in her writings include environmentalism, class structure, feminism and ecological diversity all arise from a life lived in pursuit of social justice. When *Animal Dreams* was published in 1990, it soon became a popular and critical success as the novel won an American Library Association Notable Book and Best Book for Young Adults, Pen/USA West Fiction Award, *New York Times* Notable Book and Edward Abbey Award for Ecofiction. The Kentucky-born author Barbara Kingsolver rises to prominence and becomes an important voice among the southwestern writers in the United States. Based on her book *Holding the Line* which covers the great Arizona mine strike of 1983, the novel, through the characterization of Codi and her female town fellows devoted to the protection of their homeland ecological system, is considered as an ecofeminist fiction incorporating the themes of female autonomy and ecology. Houston and Warren argue that *Animal Dreams* is one of Kingsolver's works that unfold a blending of "environmental fiction and feminism known as ecofeminism" (4). According to Roberta Rubenstein, Codi's longing for belonging can be illustrated in two dimensions, namely, "the longing for the idealized lost mother and her association with the lost home/land" and the longing for "connection to a collective cultural history and home" (38). According to Richard Hofrichter, environmental justice is about "social transformation directed toward meeting human need and enhancing the quality of life...using resources sustainably" (4). Its central principle stresses "equal access to natural resources and the right to clean air and water, adequate health care, affordable shelter and a safe workplace" (Hofrichter,5). As a matter of fact, environmental justice takes into

account two dimensions: the equality between mankind and nature and the equality of all human beings. In another word, the practice to call for environmental justice is a movement in the West which tends to incorporate “ecological issues into a larger social-justice agenda” (Hofrichter, 5). First, people are expected to engage in sustainable development. Instead of spoiling natural resources for selfish reasons pompously as the master of the earth, human beings should pay due respect to nonhuman nature while ensuring our quality of life. Secondly, all the people should have equal access to healthy food and safe shelters. However, the fact is that the under privileged such as the colored, the poor, and many women are likely to become victims of nuclear waste, industrial landfill and numerous other pollutants. Under this condition, people are encouraged to re-think the issue of environmental justice and make efforts to ensure the availability of safe and healthy environment for all the people. In the novel *Animal Dreams*, Codi Homero and her hometown fellows are a form of environmental justice movement launched for the rejuvenation of the endangered place by protecting it from the toxic threat of the mining company. The novel relates the homecoming experience of Codi, during which she begins to work with the organization Stitch and Bitch Club to save polluted Grace. While arguing for the equality between mankind and nature Codi, with her people in the hometown try to fight against the Black Mountain Company, the source of environmental injustice which can be evidenced in the degradation of the environmental and dismissal of human rights. In *Animal Dreams*, people's rights to clean water and healthy land are denied, which manifests the rampant social injustice which has put the underprivileged at risk. For the sake of their own survival and that of their future generations, the local people in Grace, including Codi, begin to fight for social justice as a part of their struggle for environmental justice.

Social Injustice: The degradation of the environment in Grace, where, the marginalized Hispanic people live proves that the exploitation of the mineral resources denies the local people access to clean water and thus put their livelihood in danger. Their struggle against the unsustainable development in the local minefield becomes a microscopic part of the environmental justice. The marginalization of the local people, the majority of which are Hispanic, is closely related to their dangerous position as the victims of the environmental injustice in Grace. As the title of Chapter 7 reveals, Grace is the poison ground created by the Black Mountain Company, the emblem of the industrial capitalism. The exploitation and appropriation of the mineral resources have reduced the place to a ghost town or “a shipwreck” (*AD*, 122). Indeed, it is Codi herself who recognizes the subtle changes in the fruit trees: before the fruits are ripe enough, they already fall onto the ground, with “tiny, immature nuts” (*AD*, 56). Later, she hears the heated discussion among the local people about the fruit drop and knows that the Black Mountain Company is culpable for the poisoned river which has negative impact on the fruit produce. What is more complicated is that the company, in order to avert the punishment of the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency),

intends to dam up and divert the river so that the poisoned water will not go through Grace. Without water, the local people, who were cheated out of the water rights many years ago, have no other choice but to relocate. They will become “refugees...turned out from here like pennies from a pocket” (*AD*, 149). In this sense, the development in the name of the progress of civilization in the West is what Vandana Shiva calls “maldevelopment” which is characteristic of a “fragmented, reductionist, dualist perspective” that places man over nature (6). Nature becomes the resources subjected to the domination of anthropocentric men. Besides, the whole process of exploiting the natural resources is also the process of marginalizing the underprivileged. For the local people who have no idea about their inviolable rights to property legislated in the constitution, they are deceived by the company to sell their water rights at an extremely low price. The imminent death of Grace indeed is a consequence of the social and economical development in the West. For the poor Hispanic people in *Animal Dreams*, they can no longer continue their subsistence economy in the orchards. Instead, they have to depend on the mining company for a livelihood at the cost of their own health and the well-being of the land. It is mentioned that the father of J.T. died of lung cancer after his forty years of drudgery in the smelter. In truth, the acknowledgement of the dying place is an important element that motivates Codi and her town fellows into action.

Fight against Ecological Crisis: Faced with the imminent death of nature and their own injustice in the whole process, Codi and her town fellows make all the efforts to save their hometown. Different ways are resorted in the fight for environmental justice. Codi changes her attitude toward her relationship with her hometown helps her to identify with the place where she was born and account for her engagement in the education about the seriousness of the pollution and the cultural rejuvenation for the improvement of her hometown. At the outset, Codi is only an observer who stands outside Grace witnessing the unfortunate changes, and a listener who hears people's concerns over their ruined home. She considers herself a person who does not belong to the “lost continent” (64). She takes in the symptoms of an endangered place, feeling unaffected. She refers to the place as “the Sahara” poisoned by a large quantity of sulfuric acid (*AD*, 65). However, she begins to become a participant in the local environmental justice movement. As Codi becomes a teacher teaching in her former high school biology, she uses what she has learned to confirm the death of nature in Grace. In the classes, she leads her students to conduct experiments on the samples of water taken from the local river, she is filled with “a strange panic to see that stillness under powerful magnification” of the microscopes: the absence of “the teeming microscopic world of a dirty river” proves that the local water is “dead” (*AD*, 109-110). Her further experiments on the PH of the water testify to the fact that the “canary” system of protozoan in the life of a river is dead (110). And the death of water is affecting the life of animals in the river: the frogs are extremely easy to catch. So Codi

predicts that “next year there would not even be fish or frogs in the river; these particular representatives of the animal kingdom were headed for extinction” (*AD*, 148). The alarm given by Codi virtually prompts to fight for the survival of her hometown and encourages the community members to stand more firmly for their equal rights to have access to clean water and healthy land. Second, Codi is more determined to be involved in the environmental justice movement because she has been inspired by Loyd's alternative understanding of place. In accordance with Heise, Loyd Peregrina “most clearly embodies the novel's ideal environmental ethic” on account of his profound place attachment (Heise, 392). In contrast to the dominant ideology that people can own a place, Loyd maintains that a place owns people. To him, Anglos are “like turtles” carrying the whole house along if they go to other places whereas his people are “like coyotes” who come home to a good place by turning around three times in the grass (*AD*, 235). Besides, he points out to Codi that to be home is not necessarily to be in the same place. What matters is whether people can accommodate with it. For his people, they build the houses “the earth could embrace” (*AD*, 211). As it is an honor for people to accept mortality, it is the greatest honor for people to let a house “fall back down into the ground” (235). He takes Codi to Kinishba. In the eight-hundred-year-old prehistoric condos, the walls are virtually graveyards for dead babies. Loyd also takes Codi to the Spider Rock where they can see another village that reminds Codi of “cliff-swallow nests, or mud-dauber nests, or crystal gardens sprung from their own matrix: the perfect constructions of nature” (*AD*, 211). Native Indians' accommodation with nature is in sharp contrast with the domination of nature in the white culture, which is evidenced in the mining company in Grace.

However, the environmental injustice in *Animal Dreams* is committed against the welfare of the local people in Grace. To take advantage of the mineral resources in Codi's hometown, people in charge of the Black Mountain Company inflicts serious damage to the land regardless of the sufferings of the underprivileged. While destroying the place where nonhuman species depend on for survival, they also destroy the dwelling place where the local inhabitants live. In face of the enormous difficulty in fighting for environmental justice, Codi needs to work with her town fellows to save her hometown in addition to her own efforts in educating her students as well as maintaining a bond with the land by drawing inspiration from Loyd's alternative understanding of a place. In reality, a very important strategy for the grass-roots organization led by women is cultural activism, which is a third element in the fight for environmental justice movement. By means of the creation and reaffirmation of community culture or cultural activism, more people will be mobilized for environmental justice and social development. During the course of the reinvigoration of the local culture, Codi becomes increasingly engaged. At first, Codi is surprised to be invited by the Stitch and Bitch Club to be one of the peacock ladies to sell the local handicraft, the piñatas. Still, she takes up the responsibility of driving the truck loaded

with the peacock-feather-made artworks to Tucson, thinking that she just needs some relaxation outside the suffocating atmosphere in Grace. It proves that she is very good at selling the piñatas. Codi does not participate directly in the second round of cultural activism, but she is responsible for the “mimeographed broadside,” which is to be attached to the piñatas, and which is to include the history of Grace as “an Eden of orchards in the idyllic days before the Black Mountain...lost to a poisoned river” (AD, 206). The story about the deterioration in Grace as well as the delicate artistic piñatas does attract people's attention. The CBS news come to Grace for an interview and, as mentioned in the above section, Dona Althea is asked to retell the story of the Gracela sisters. For Codi, that story is “the Genesis of Grace,” a Biblical story in which nine Spanish sisters, along with some peacocks, come to the New World, marry some Mexican men, and give rise to the origin of the small town (AD, 267). Grace draws the attention of the public and succeeds in becoming one of the cultural heritages. Under the legal protection, hometown will no longer be destroyed because the Black Mountain Company is forbidden to dam the river. This evidently shows that cultural activism is an effective method for the local people to fight for environmental justice.

Conclusion: Owing to the efforts of Codi and her town fellows, environmental justice is reasserted in Grace. By equating human beings to animals and regaining her past identity as a nature lover, Codi confirms that people are not different from animals and that we should take into consideration the rights of nature for sustainable development of all species. Moreover, by educating her students about the seriousness of the pollution in her hometown, inspired by the alternative understanding of place of her Native Indian boyfriend, Codi engages herself in the local environmental justice movement to fight for the equal access to clean water and healthy land. In the process, cultural activism, which is meant to instill into the local people the cultural repertoire of the hometown, is immensely helpful in the fight for the equality among all the people. Eventually, their efforts to fight for environmental justice pay off with Codi's hometown becoming one of the cultural heritages.

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