

# Reflecting Aquatic Life and Ecology in Literature: A Study of Animal Dreams

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## Abstract

Water is the source of all living beings and is necessary for the existence of both biotic and abiotic factors. It connects the whole ecosystem and is a foundation for the welfare of society. If anything harms the water bodies, it affects the whole of humanity. More than 70% of the earth's surface is surrounded by water so paying adequate attention to the water bodies like rivers, oceans, streams, and lakes is required to be an ecologically conscious person. Showing proper concern for the environment is necessary for every individual. The American novelist, political activist, and biologist Barbara Kingsolver's works centre on ecological issues which create consciousness among the readers. Her novel *Animal Dreams* is one such novel that significantly highlights the issues of pollution in the river Grace made by the Black Mountain Mining Company. Degradation and exploitation of the natural world are projected by Kingsolver in the novel. When the major water source of the people is being contaminated by the mining company, the characters in the novel start protesting against the company to safeguard the river Grace, which is their evidence for fertility. This paper aims to study the importance of the preservation of waterbodies to have an appropriate climate, food, economy, and oxygen in the light of Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*.

**Keywords:** Ecosystem, Environment, Biotic, Abiotic, Consciousness

Literature can be seen as a mirror of life as it depicts and reflects social issues, human emotions, and experiences in both fiction and non-fiction works. Through its portrayal of characters, exploration of themes, and evocation of emotions, literature serves as a window into a world, offering insight into the human experience and the human condition. Whether read literature for enlightenment or entertainment, it serves as a mirror of life representing the world around us. In another way, literature also can be a mirror of aquatic life. It reflects the diversity and beauty of aquatic life and the dangers and challenges it faces.

Readers of literature may go deeper into the wonders and secrets of aquatic settings through the use of oceans, lakes, and rivers as background for the stories by the writers. Authors across various genres and periods have explored the environmental consequences of pollution, using literature as a means to raise awareness, critique societal behaviours, and depict the profound impact of human actions on the natural world. Some literary works directly engage with environmental activism by portraying the harmful

effects of water pollution. Authors use their narratives to advocate for environmental consciousness, urging society to consider the consequences of human activities on water ecosystems.

Water is essential to the survival of every species on earth and without it, there is no life on earth. Water bodies play a vital role in the health of the ecosystem. Many species depend on water for their survival because it gives them access to food, shelter, and places to reproduce and grow. It also has a significant impact on the climate and weather of the planet. Overfishing and water pollution have been considered major issues in recent years, threatening numerous aquatic species and disrupting the delicate balance of our waterways.

Literature and aquatic life are two different yet linked ideas. Life in the water refers to the many species of flora and fauna that live and thrive in watery situations, whereas literature refers to the body of written works that have been produced throughout human history. Many writers have used the ocean and other water bodies as a background for their writings and water imagery can take on a variety of moods, from the serene to the wild and violent. The literary genre known as "aquatic literature" concentrates on works that are set in or near bodies of water, such as lakes, rivers, marshlands, and seas. A wide variety of literary genres, including poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama, are included in this category. The epic poem *The Odyssey* (750-650 BCE) by Homer, in which the main character, Odysseus, must sail the perilous waters of the Mediterranean Sea to return home, is one of the earliest examples of aquatic writing. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), a tale about a sailor searching for a massive white whale, is another classic example. *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) novel by Ernest Hemingway examines the bond between a fisherman and the sea, and *The Water Dancer* (2019) by Ta-Nehisi Coates, a historical fiction book that tells the tale of a young enslaved man with the ability to control water, are two examples of contemporary literature (fiction) with aquatic themes. *The Sea Around Us* (1951) by Rachel Carson, examines the geological and biological history of the ocean, and *The River of Doubt* (2005) by Candice Millard, recounts Theodore Roosevelt's actual journey down an uncharted tributary of the Amazon River. These are two examples of nonfiction works that fall under the category of aquatic literature. Barbara Kingsolver is one of the authors who prioritised the issues of pollution in the river Grace by the Black Mountain Mining Company in her novel *Animal Dreams*. This paper argues how aquatic literature depicts the life of river Grace and the life around the river through the lens of ecocriticism.

Barbara Kingsolver is a poet, novelist, essayist, biologist and social activist. She grew up in a rural area and her association with nature and nature's surroundings are reflected in her writings. Her writings deal mainly with the interconnections humans have with nature. She is a living author and is actively engaged on Instagram, Facebook and other social media platforms by creating consciousness in her readers through her simple living style, her organic cultivation, and her oneness with nature. She has written a total of nine novels including her recent novel *Demon Copperhead* which is published on October 18<sup>th</sup> 2022. Her *Animal Dreams* (1990) is one such novel that deals with an ecological issue with the main focus on river pollution caused by the Black Mountain Mining Company. *Animal Dreams* has won the 1990 Edward Abbey Award for the best Ecofiction and the 1991 USA West Fiction Award. It is also an American Association Notable Book, Arizona Library Association Book of the Year and a New York Times Notable Book. Throughout the novel, the river Grace and its ecosystem play a crucial role in the plot and the development of the characters. The river represents both the necessity of protecting the natural world and the interdependence of all living beings. The river is described as a source of life and renewal, but also as a reminder of the dangers and destructive forces of nature. The character's

relationship with the river reflects their own internal conflicts and growth as individuals. The characters often reflect on the river's health and how it is connected to the health of the community and their own personal struggles.

Industrialization has brought prosperity to the economy of every nation yet on another side it has brought immeasurable damage to humanity and nature. Though it is a great blessing with a good number of discoveries, it has made several changes in the lives of many with positive and negative impacts. The major transformation from traditional to progressiveness, rural to urban and agrarian society to industrial society is known as Modernization. Modernization is the root cause of the destruction of nature through its establishment of industries. It has both merits and demerits in its values to society. The economy of the nation is raised by the development of industrialization and modernization but in another way, it brings damage to living and non-living things by polluting natural resources. In the book *American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship*, Julie Sze's essay *Boundaries of Violence* highlights "the persistent patterns of water contamination and destruction are not accidental but instead endemic and embedded in systems of exploitation, heightened in an era of neoliberalism." ( 142) The above statement is true that contamination of water does not happen all on a sudden but it is a gradual or continuous one occurring years and years. It is the same with River Grace in Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*. Continuous mixing of the mining company's waste gradually weakens the living organisms and the biotics of the river. The development process of modernization causes damage to the land, water, humans and other natural resources. Cosima or Codi is the protagonist who becomes a mouthpiece of Barbara Kingsolver in the novel *Animal Dreams* in revealing the crisis to the community about what the environment has undergone. Through her perspective, the whole novel runs around the theme of preserving the river Grace from the clutches of the Black Mountain Mining Company. River Grace is witnessing the destruction of her people, animals, landscape and waterscape through the chemical wastage of the mining factory. This is a piece of evidence that nature is being harmed and violated by various factors such as modernization, industrialization and globalization.

It is important to keep count of the impact of industrialization on the environment. What is left after its impact is pollution. Pollution from industries can cause a major impact on the environment and it is required to bring harmony with nature by not harming them. Racheal Carson underlines the contamination of nature in her book *Silent Spring* by emphasizing "The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials." (Carson 4) Toxic materials from industries highly pollute the environment. The world today needs to be discerning the right path to preserve water bodies. *Animal Dreams* centres around the theme of violence against nature in which the author highlights the issues of pollution in the river Grace. The ecological crisis in the novel kindles the readers to act against the injustice done to nature. Black Mountain Mining Company is the company created fictionally by Barbara Kingsolver through which the author conveys the strong message to humanity not to contaminate the waterbodies to any extent. By its leaching operation, the Black Mountain Mining company dumps sulfuric acid in the river Grace and the river gets devastated therefore it is apparent that there is no evidence of life in the river. Wherever the lifeless river flows, it leaves the farmland, trees, and fruits barren and lifeless.

In *Animal Dreams*, Codi, the predominant character and the teacher of biology takes her students to study the environment around the river Grace. In part of the research, Codi collects a sample of the river water to investigate the biotic factors of the river. Codi is shocked to know that the river is being polluted by the Black Mountain Mining Company and its leaching operation that produces Sulfuric acid.

This sulfuric acid from the mining company turns the fertile land into poisonous land. The health of Mother Earth is thus infected and it becomes the key element of discussion in the novel. Codi is restless after knowing the truth behind the river pollution. She exclaims, “Our water is dead”(Kingsolver 110) and she is also shocked to know the PH level of the water is “higher than the battery acid”(Kingsolver 110). She yells at the children who aren’t more centred on ecosystems and environment and says “I knew that, but still I screamed at them because Black Mountain was poisoning their mother’s milk and all they cared about was sex and a passing grade” (Kingsolver 253) Being concerned more about the future of Grace, Codi talks about the interconnection one should have with nature by making her students aware of the ecological crisis that their county is enduring. She says to her students, If I can’t teach you something you’ll remember, then I haven’t even been here this year . . . You kids think this pollution shit is not your problem, right? Somebody will clean up the mess. It’s not your fault. Well, your attitude stinks. You’re as guilty as anybody. Do you, or do you not, think the world was put here for you to use? (Kingsolver 254)

Therefore, Kingsolver portrays Codi as environmentally conscious and uses her character to convey a vision of a pollution-free environment. Codi tries all the possible ways to bring back her former days Grace without any pollutants. She also wishes to have bright forthcoming days for future generations. During their visit to Pueblo, Codi expresses her surprise to Lyod by admiring the fertile trees, landscape and orchards. She also expresses her grief for Grace. “So how come this canyon’s stayed productive for a thousand and some odd years, and we can’t even live in Grace for one century without solving it up” (Kingsolver 215).

Raising a voice against the corporate company is a challenging thing and the people in the novel stand against them through their piñata peacock revolution. Kingsolver creates awareness of environmental pollution to restore the health of Mother Earth by protesting against the mining company. Women characters in the novel are very resistant to fighting for their environmental rights. Ecological consciousness makes them love their land, rivers, and other species on earth. “....ecological resistance involves becoming friends with another species or a river or a mountain, for example.” (Devall 197) Their actions symbolize a broader ecofeminist narrative, where women lead the charge against ecological and social injustices, echoing the ideas of Vandana Shiva on ecofeminism and environmental activism. The call for environmental concern is the first step to saving the earth from eco disasters. Kingsolver shows that recognizing environmental issues, such as pollution and habitat destruction, is the essential first step toward action. This awareness drives the characters to unite, fight for the health of their land and river, and advocate for sustainability. Through their efforts, the novel emphasizes the importance of ecological responsibility as a path to prevent environmental disasters and ensure the survival of both nature and humanity.

**Barbara Kingsolver foregrounds** the issue of fruit fall in a few pages of *Animal Dreams*. By repeating the same problem again and again Kingsolver projects her major concern for the polluted river and the infected earth and its species. Seeing the ground covered with tiny and immature nuts of pecan, on her way to Domingos's house Codi asks John Tucker about what has happened to the pecans and in a reply John Tucker says, “I’ve been seeing this all over. “Fruit drop” (Kingsolver-56) Fruit drop is an alarm or a threat to the environment which is visible outside and it is a sign that anything may happen at any time to the environment. Codi said, “I noticed they were talking about fruit drops. I plainly heard one of them say the words, poison ground.” (Kingsolver 63) The ground of Grace becomes poisoned by the leaching operation executed by the Black Mountain mining company. The EPA already give them warning signs

to shut down that leaching operation within thirty days. “They are not going to stop no leaching operation on account of our pecan trees”(Kingsolver 64) “It’s going to kill every damn tree in this canyon.”(Kingsolver 64) –another man at the party said sadly about the sulfuric acid from the mine and its causes. Mankind’s ability and fertility depend upon the fertility of nature (water bodies). It is the major idea focused on by Kingsolver throughout this novel. Fruit fall illustrated in the words of Kingsolver denotes the infertility of nature due to the chemical mixes in the river. When the tree cannot keep its own fruit it is already an infertile one. The mining activity disturbs the natural order. Fruit loss and the extinction of river species result from the land losing its fertility and the water losing its quality. Women in the novel have a vivid awareness of the natural world and wish to have their lives connected harmoniously with nature. Women’s longingness to save the ecosystem through the Stitch and Bitch club is highlighted by the author. Kingsolver’s female characters take the lead in establishing healthier ecologies, along the way working to overcome the retrograde tendencies of their male mates or associates. (Bender 126) Women are more connected to nature and nature-related issues than men in the novel. They are depicted as ecologically sensitive to the needs of nature and that has made them educate their community people about the threat they have undergone over time. They have formed together as a club to raise their voice against industrialization. “Affirmation of the integrity of ecosystems frequently involves a campaign to save from development some river or canyon or wilderness area.” (Devall 197) To save the environment Stitch and Bitch club members and Codi hold hands together to save River Grace and the county people. Their idea of making piñata peacocks to protest against the mining company is noteworthy. The main idea of the club is to raise funds through their crafts for the betterment of society by their making of peacock piñatas. Something very specific about the Stitch and Bitch club is the members in the club are women. Women taking initiation for the reformation of society is strongly affirmed in the writings of Barbara Kingsolver. Crossing the boundaries, women use their talents of making crafts to save River Grace. The peacock piñatas symbolically represent the river, Grace. Inscribing the history and the condition of Grace inside the peacock piñata, the club members can connect to the entire nation and it serves as a tool for creating awareness among people. The unknown Grace becomes known by everyone across the world through their innovative method. The piñata revolution of the people of Grace is highly appreciable for their efforts to bring back their aquatic life safely.

As Vandana Shiva in her book *Ecofeminism* highlights, “We are part of nature, not her masters and owners.”(21) It should be understood by the people living on earth that we are merely visitors or part of nature not the masters or owners of nature. Every individual has to contribute something or the other to the welfare of the ecosystem. Kingsolver’s characters are some examples to be followed, admired, and to be appreciated for being ecologically conscious persons. Addressing her readers in the first chapter of her *Silent Spring*, Carson says “There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings.” (1) this dream of hers will come true when the writers like Barbara Kingsolver emphasises the importance of ecology and ecosystem through their writings.

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