

Self-identity, Ground Orientation and Cultural Eco-Feminism in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*

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Abstract

Western literature has always focused on male protagonists and their lonely journeys; however, Barbara Kingsolver defies genre conventions. Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to examine the main character's search for self-identity in The Bean trees. In order to accomplish this, initially, some background information about Barbara Kingsolver is introduced as well as a broad explanation about the ecofeminist philosophy and its effect in the author. The paper examines Taylor's identity formation process through the lens of four major themes: gender, community, ethnicity, and nature. Each part combines secondary materials and careful reading to study the novel's central characters. Finally, the conclusion summarises how the preceding topics shaped Taylor's self-identity and discusses her growth throughout her journey.

Key words: self-identity, Ground orientation, ecofeminism, The bean trees, Barbara Kingsolver

Self identity, Ground Orientation and Cultural Eco-Feminism:

“Ground orientation” is understood in relation to the community and environmental, as well as in political and familial contexts. The word “orientation ” itself suggests a process of continual negotiation and analysis, rather than a fixed acceptance of how community is defined in *Animal Dreams*. Codi’s search for “ground orientation” is guided by memories and understanding of self and community. While Hallie leaves her comfortable life in Tucson for a Nicaraguan farm and Codi leaves her boy friend Carlo to return to Grace, Codi suggests that both the sisters “both headed home”(8).

This awareness of self and community is further explored in the thesis as Ground Orientation, which contains Codi’s description of Loyd’s awareness and of his environment and of his family’s participation in the traditions of their pueblo community. Community relies upon the bonds of family in *Animal Dreams*. Loyd says that he and Leander were “one boy in two skins,” to which Codi replies, “Hallie and I feel that way sometimes” (207). Parallel sibling relationship mirror the macropolitical elements of the plot. More effectively, Codi’s love for Loyd supports her understanding of Pueblo traditions and Hallie’s letters from Nicaragua expand her sister Codi’s awareness of other communities.

The value of individual as part of wider community is elevated in both Kingsolver’s fiction and non-fiction. Every individual endeavour is presented in relation to its effect on the wider group, and groups effects on an individual . Codi’s water project with her biology pupils, for example, reveals that pollution has affected the whole valley and which results in a community campaigns. Similarly, the Grace women’s emphasis on the need to save the water supply allows Codi to learn the truth about her mother’s death and her own family connections to the town. The novel’s interwoven theme of “ground orientation” is revealed by Codi and Homer’s different but interdependent narratives.

These narratives explore their individual and collective identities, through a combination of memories grounded in the characters’ reality than others. Memories are explored to reveal not only the importance of recollections but also to inform the characters’ personal and political present and to reveal further the limitations of personal memory. Somewhere between Codi and Homer’s narratives lies the history the Nolines and of Grace. It is only by putting their memories together. Kingsolver reveals the importance of broader community and history. The author’s Note to *Animal Dreams* blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction even as it attempts to differentiate between the two. Kingsolver asserts that “Grace Arizona, and its railroad depot are imaginary as is Santa Rosalia Pueblo, although it resembles the Keresan pueblos of northern New Mexico. Other places and crises in the book are actual” (127-133). It can be taken as a real assertion. It is the parallels with the “actual” which underpin the “authenticity” of the political concerns of the characters.

Kingsolver further introduces issues in a local context, such as the description of agricultural communities in Nicaragua, Native American reservation environments and local water supplies affected by mining pollution. This thesis examines the representation of community, memory and belonging in *Animal Dreams* in relation to Kingsolver desire to

answer political questions. Kingslover strategically raises the political issues to appeal the larger readership in order to raise awareness of her chosen issues. In this regard, this thesis also explores the author's use of political issues in the form of forceful prose and the voices of "ordinary" characters such as schoolteacher Codi and the various positions that mark her work: liberal, feminist and environmentalist.

Animal Dreams delves on themes of memory, safety, and loss, as well as the struggle to maintain relationships in the face of deep mistrust. Codi's work confirms Judith Herman's thesis that these motifs symbolise stages of trauma survivors' rehabilitation, but Codi also emphasises the universality of these human needs. *Animal Dreams* addresses this through its protagonist Cosima Noline, whose story is conveyed in a split narrative that alternates between her first-person perspective and a third-person perspective from her father. Codi returns to her birthplace of Grace, Arizona, in the mid-1980s, when her cherished sister Hallie leaves the house they shared in Tucson to work in Nicaragua as an agricultural expert. Additionally, their father Homer, who is still a practising physician in Grace, has demonstrated symptoms consistent with Alzheimer's disease. As Codi gradually reveals her recurrent memory problems, Kingslover's book elucidates the bond between the disturbed daughter and her distant, disoriented father. Codi's narrative exposes the depth of her fear through her inability to recall and an unexpected flood of recollection and sentiments. Codi and her father's opinions reveal that the current issue is founded in previous losses—the death of Codi's mother when she was three years old and the death of another child. She discreetly miscarried a child when she was fifteen, a daughter who frequently appears in her dreams.

The present-tense narrative of Homer Noline, which emphasises memories while mingling them with current events, portrays her sense of life throughout the novel. She directs the imposition of an order. Codi's suppressed background is revealed through the thoughts of her father. Codi, on the other hand, is capable of organising his memories and impressions. Faced with the risky voyage and possible loss of Hallie, Codi embarks on her own trek to the site of her mother's and child's horrible demise. She also returns to her high school (for one year as a biology instructor) and, lastly, to her romance with Loyd Peregrine, the guy who pregnant her unwittingly while they were both high school students. Codi's attraction to Loyd is fully consistent with Herman's and others' description of the psychology of reenactment—the drive to master a horrific experience from the past (Herman 41).

Hills Miller presents another manner in which the returns effected by recollection and reenactment can be profoundly fulfilling in *Fiction and Repetition*. Such repetitions can accomplish as in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* "raising of the dead" the return of beloved people who have been lost" (Miller 178). Even if painful, returns of the past through memory can sometimes be the only way to remain connected with those we have lost, a view expressed by a Vietnam Veteran: "I do not want to take drugs for my night-mares, because I must remain a memorial to my dead friends" (qtd. in Caruth, Preface vii). Codi's narrative reveals emotionally charged adherence to such remembering and grieving. Memory and emotion in *Animal Dreams* mirror issues raised by Judith Herman, who suggests that repressed memories may return through "observance of holidays and special occasions," along with "viewing

photographs, constructing a family tree, or visiting the site of childhood experiences” (185). One of the novel's evocative sequences generates the powerful effect of returning to a place of great pain.

After spending her second day in “Grace shopping with Emelina, meeting people she doesn’t remember, Codi describes her overcharged, response: “Grace was a memory mine field; just going into the Baptist Grocery with Emelina had charged me with emotions and a hopelessness I couldn’t name” (46). That night unable to sleep properly, Codi goes out after midnight to try to find the road “to Doc Homer’s” (47). This dream-like scene reveals the complex, obscure nature of her memories along with a startling gap in her memory, as revealing as any slip of the tongue: “I wasn’t ready to go (to Doc Homer’s) yet, but I had to make sure I knew the way. I couldn’t ask Emelina for directions to my own childhood home; I didn’t want her to know how badly dislocated I was. I’d always had trouble recalling certain specifics of childhood, but didn’t realize until now that I couldn’t even recognize them at point-blank range. Infact, I felt like the victim of a head injury”. (47) Finally, admitting that “Doc Homer’s” is her “own childhood home” Codi shows that she has no idea how to find the house where she lived until she was eighteen. And when she seeks this house-secretly, in the middle of the night-she thinks instead of the field where her mother died recalling the scene in rich, visual detail, including the stretcher “like a fragile, important package,” the helicopter “sending out currents of air across the alfalfa field behind the hospital,” and the “alfalfa plants show their sivery undersides in patterns that looked like waves,” so that the field become the ocean “I’d seen in story books, here in the middle of the desert, like some miracle” (48).

Since Codi was “home with a babysister” when this occurred, she accepts that these vivid memory is actually one of her many “fabrications based on stories I’d heard” (48), suggesting the self-doubts of incest survivors whose memories are denied. Yet remembering her mother’s strong will shown in her refusal to fly, leads Codi to see how she herself differs from Hallie in having known their mother as a “Ferociously loving” presence, something Codi “tried to preserve” and be for Hallie though feeling she “couldn’t get it right” (49).

This memory reestablishes a connection between her mother, her self, and Hallie that seems to enable her to find her father’s house. Codi says : “I stopped suddenly in the center of the road, in the moon’s bright light, with shadow trickling down hill from my heels like the water Witcher’s well spring finally struck open. I’d found the right path” (50). Codi repeatedly associates memories with imagery of water in the desert, suggesting their preciousness and life-sustaining power. *Animal Dream* revisits the same Arizona mining country with its depiction of the fictional town of Grace, as it faces the economic and environmental threat posed by an unnamed mining corporation in 1985-6. The tale alternates between Codi’s, a returning local, and Homer’s views. Codi moves into a little house in the backyard of her old friend Emelina and commits herself to the community while confronting difficult memories of adolescent miscarriage and her mother’s death. Codi works with Grace and a group of local women to prevent water pollution. Codi’s dedication to her community awakening campaign for environmental preservation paralleled her romance with Loyd Peregrina, a Native American environmentalist and high school lover (295-96). Codi Noline continues, “I was gaining a hazy

understanding of the distinction between Hallie and myself. It wasn't a question of bravery or dreams, but rather something far simpler.

A pilot would call it ground orientation. I'd spent a long time circling above the clouds looking for life while Hallie was living it (77)". Codi's realization that her sister Hallie's active political engagement secures the "ground orientation" which she also carves exemplifies the political values at the heart of *Animal Dreams*. In Codi's description, Hallie is loved by all who meet her; she has a clear memory of her past, and as an asset to the translocal communities of which she is a member. She houses political refugees in Tuckson, works on a farm in Nicaragua, and her letters make her a constant presence in Codi's Arizona life. For a selfconfessed "homerignorant" (77), Hallie's "ground orientation" is a sense of belonging to a political, environmental and cultural community.

In the novel, Kingsolver uses inter-and intra-textual narratives, and interrelated characters to blur the line between fact and fiction. These techniques direct Codi's political and environmental search for "ground orientation." Central to "ground orientation," is the idea of interrelatedness across the community based on an awareness of the past, of the environment and the ground beneath our feet. This thesis while focusing on Codi's ground orientation analyzes the theme of belonging through community and memory while examining the defining structural and intertextual techniques which shape her narrative style. Kingsolver's *Animal Dream* speaks to her negotiation of history and memory through the distinctive preoccupation with "ground orientation". Ground orientation employs a historicist perspective which, as Fredric Jameson suggests, makes our reading of the past "vitally dependent on our experience of the present" (11). In keeping with Jameson's recognition of the importance of the contemporary in our understanding and representation of the past.

This paper argues that Codi's adult experiences shape her representation of childhood memories. Kingsolver's representation of the political struggles of mining communities of Arizona in the 1980s is not only shaped by the present, but also informs readers about the history that underpins current struggles. This symbolic relationship between past and present is particularly evident in *Animal Dreams* also contributes to the notion of interrelatedness that this thesis posits as fundamental to the ability of Kingsolver's political and popular fiction to raise awareness of the author's chosen issues. Moreover, women's activism in *Animal Dreams* emphasizes the importance of families and communities. *Animal Dreams* privileges protagonist Codi and the female members of the community. In the novel female characters are significant in saving the town from the poisoned water. It is a political rather than solely a gender issue which characterizes the struggle of a small town against a politically powerful bureaucratic corporation. In *Animal Dreams*, through familiar female voices such as matriarch Dona Althea, giving more time to the family than the profession, Kingsolver's women challenge political and social hierarchies, fighting injustice in their local communities.

Women offer alternative ways of approaching old problems, often through seemingly small actions such as crafting a traditional piñata or turning out on a (traditionally masculine) picket line each day. Female characters such as Dona Althea face her past in order to construct

hopeful futures on a personal and a broader political level. The experiences of female protagonist as depicted in *Animal Dreams* underpins the structure and theme of the novel. In *Animal Dreams* Codi describes settlements “torn up when (Fictional mining company) Black Mountain chased a vein of copper,” and claims that “not even the graveyards were sacred” (161). The old men in *Animal Dreams* discuss the pollution of Grace’s orchards by the mine’s “leaching operation” (63). *Animal Dreams* thus presents the subtle connections and complexities of plot and themes. Lisa see, in *Publishers Weekly* argues that Kingsolver had “taken all of her previous themes native Americans, us involvement in Nicaragua, environmental issues, parental relationship woman’s taking charge of their own lives-tossed them into a literary pot and created a perfectly constructed novel” (46). However, this present research focuses on the issue of how the memory and a history hunt the protagonist, and how with the help of network of community she is able to reconstruct her identify.

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