

# Cultural Eco-Feminism in and Barbara Kingsolver's Novel "The Bean Trees" and Mary Alice Monroe's Novel "Beach House"

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**Annotation:** This article demonstrates the place and role of the image of women in the bestselling of American modern literature, Barbara Kingsolver's novel "The Bean Trees" and contemporary saga called "Beach House" by prominent writer Mary Alice Monroe. It discusses genuine works of the novelists Barbara Kingsolver and M.A.Monroe to explore how the author defined, reflected and shaped gender roles. This article discourses on the representation of eco-feminist views in sympathetic novels "The Bean Trees" and "Beach House".

**Keywords:** eco-feminism, female images, "Southern" woman, an image of woman, nature and woman, domination.

## Introduction

Throughout history, nature is portrayed as feminine; their reproductive capacities make women closer to nature than men. Both women and nature are life sustaining and resource giving but their role is often neglected in society. The human life has been affected by oppression for long time. The power that is levelled upon nature makes the same destruction that is similar to that resulting from the oppression of women. A society based on cooperation and balance rather than dominance for survival on this planet. Poverty of land and environment is one of the crucial problems that we face today. Technology, modern industry and war are some of the problems that results in the sterility of nature and the sterility of society comes from men's hostility towards women. Women are hurt most as they suffer double oppression of patriarchy, education, race and poverty. Meanwhile literature reflects the foundation of society, a study of relationship between environment and women is a part of feministic studies.

Eco-Feminism is a branch of literature where they form a relationship between environment and literature. It has developed as a literary movement which points to the common ground between environmentalism and feminism with some current linking deep ecology and feminism. Ecofeminism traces its beginning from the feminist movements such as the elimination of slavery and limit for defending the rights of women. Eco-feminism as an ideology and movement finds that the oppression of women is interlinked to the oppression of nature with the same masculine centered attitudes and practices concerning to the patriarchal society. This oppression is still there in the contemporary period. This paper attempts to explain Mary Alice Monroe's novel "Beach House" and Barbara Kingsolver's novel "The Bean Trees" in terms of Ecofeminism. The novels show how women and nature are related to each other and how both are oppressed by the patriarchal society in the same way and how women and nature both are showing resistance towards this dominance in their own ways.

## Methodology of the research

W. David Laird "Review of The Bean Trees" (2012) and Ahmad Jasim Mohammad Alazzawi "Cultural Ecofeminism in Barbara Kingsolver's Novel the Bean Trees" (2019) have studied different characteristics of Cultural Eco-Feminism in Barbara Kingsolver's novel. The theme of

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ecofeminism in American literature and its connection with the eco-fiction genre, the characteristics of this genre in Mary Alice Monroe's eco-fiction novels have been deeply studied by critics and literary scholars such as K.Merchant, M.G.Sherilin, Sh.Spretnak, W.Douglas, R.Nash, G.K.Gard in world literary studies.

### Analysis

Cultural Eco-feminism insists that women are close to nature through their long-time social roles which are pregnancy, giving birth, raising children and Cultural Eco-Feminism in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Bean Trees* Ahmad Jasim Mohammad Alazzawi 778 doing housework. Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival* "describes Eco-feminism by saying that it is the childbirth and industrialization of plant reproduction".<sup>2</sup> Natural imagery in Barbara Kingsolver the *Bean Trees* compares women destiny with nature and giving oppression to women and nature.

*"We crossed to Arizona state line at sunup. The clouds were pink and fat and hilarious-looking, like the hippo ballerinas in a Disney movie. The road took us through a place called Texas Canyon that looked nothing like Texas, heaven be praised for that, but looked like nothing else I had ever seen either. It was a kind of forest, except that in place of trees there were all these puffy-looking rocks shaped like roundish animals and roundish people".*<sup>3</sup>

Kingsolver interlinked the domination of male on both the woman and nature. As an ecofeminist writer, she tries to convey her message that woman tries to keep the environment as clean as possible and decrease the possibilities of destruction of the landscape.

*"In the old days, I suppose it would have been bringing the city a fresh load of life like a blood vessel carrying platelets to circulate through the lungs." Nowadays, If you could even call the railroad an artery of Tucson, you would have to say it was a hardened one".*<sup>4</sup>

Cultural Eco-feminism asserts that women are described in various terms that are close to nature and animals, for examples; rose, tree, cat and bird, by using such terms, it has become clear that woman treated as nature and oppressed by male domination. In the *bean trees*, Turtle resembles Cynthia as a cut. *"Cynthia had these tawny gold eyes like some members of the cat family, as certain fair-haired people do."* *"The doll was a hand-me down from Mattie's. It came with a pair of red-checked pajamas, complete with regular sized shirt buttons, that someone had apparently sewn by hand. Turtle adored the doll and had named it, with no help from anyone, Shirley Poppy."*<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, women characters in Mary Alice Monroe's major novels, especially in *Beach House Series* bear an image of strong "Southern" women with personal struggles who overcome failure and standing up to regenerate distinctive relationships. For example, a protagonist Cara Rutledge in the novel "Beach House" represents a woman who in search of freedom has left her home in traditional Charleston, South to Chicago, North with great expectations:

*"She had been only eighteen when she'd left Charleston for points north. She didn't care where she went, as long as it wasn't in the South. She'd had her fill of the unspoken but clearly understood expectations of a young woman, especially one from an old Charleston family. She would go to the college of their choice, find a husband and get married, then live somewhere in the South. Her whole life had been neatly mapped out for her.*

*But all along, she'd been studying maps of her own. She left home in a huff of tears and landed in Chicago. That soaring city on Lake Michigan suited her outspoken, rebellious ways more than the delicately mannered, cultured city of Charleston ever had. So she'd stayed, trading saltwater for fresh,*

<sup>2</sup> Shiva. V. 1988. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival*. India

<sup>3</sup> Kingsolver. B. 1988. *The Bean Trees*. Harper, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Kingsolver. B. 1988. *The Bean Trees*. Harper, New York.

<sup>5</sup> Mies, M and Shiva V.1993 *Ecofeminism*. London.



*her southern lilt for a midwestern twang, vowing to make a place in the world with her brains and wit, not her feminine charms.”<sup>6</sup>*

Throughout the family saga Cara is shaped “from a sweet blossom to a fine example of the flower of Southern womanhood”. In the second part of the saga “Beach House Memories” she was described free-spirited in her childhood years:

*“She was like her father in other ways, too. She had his stubborn determination, his independent spirit, and, too, his will to win”<sup>7</sup>*

In this novel Cara’s mother, Olivia Rutledge undergoes sharp changes in her self-realization as a woman. New York Times bestselling author Dorothea Benton Frank defines the character Lovie in the following way: *“Beach House Memories—a poignant and emotional tale of a strong, passionate woman torn between duty and desire, between the traditions of the old South and the social changes sweeping America—will capture your heart. For Lovie, it is an empowering journey of seasons of selfdiscovery.”<sup>8</sup>* In the novel in each summer Olivia starts for the beach house on the Isle of Palms with her children Cara and Palmer. Despite the short difference in the distance (only some miles) between her historic house on Tradd Street in Charleston, the treasured, centuries-old family antiques that filled the Rutledge family’s home and her seaside Primrose Cottage on the beach, she often feels like she was leaving all her problems behind where the earth was rooted and solid. The precious summers spent on the barrier island are Lovie’s refuge. Here, she can escape with her children from the social expectations of her traditional Southern mother, and her overbearing husband’s disrespectful attitude. Here, she entertains her lifelong vocation as a “Turtle Lady,” caring for the loggerhead sea turtles that lay their eggs in the warm night sand and then slip back into the sea.

This summer, however, is different. Visiting biologist Russell Bennett arrives on the island to make research on the loggerheads. What begins as a shared interest for the turtles advances into a love far more passionate and profound than Lovie has ever known—but one that demands her to deal with the most intense decision of her life. For Charleston’s elite, divorce is an unforgivable scandal, and Stratton’s influence is far-reaching. If Lovie dares to dream beyond a summer affair, she risks losing everything: her prominence, her wealth, even her precious children.

In the fourth part of the family saga, Cara reflects her memories on the family’s old seaside cottage with her mother and builds on the following thoughts:

*“Primrose Cottage had been her mother’s beach house. No, Cara thought on reflection. More than her house. The cottage had been her mother’s sanctuary. Her place of refuge. Her source of inspiration. Lovie had come here to escape the burdens of her social obligations in Charleston. On the island she was free to pursue her passion—sea turtles. Lovie had been the Isle of Palms’s first “sea turtle lady.” She’d formed the first turtle team.”*

Indeed, Olivia Rutledge’s passion for turtles and the nature is unique. When Dr. Russell Bennet for the first time asks the reason of being extremely involved in the turtles, each summer studying their laying eggs and thoroughly putting her observations into notes in the Sea Turtle Journal, Lovie brings such explanation:

*“It’s rather like housework,” she began. “No, that’s not quite right. I mean . . . How can I explain it? When a woman is in her home, she’s always looking, or more, scanning, wondering if the pot’s boiling, if she’s out of milk, if the children are in view, if the doors are locked.” She was talking as much to herself as to him. “We women walk around our houses every day, day after day, picking things up, patting things down, observing patterns, changes. We tend our nest by being fully present. We pay attention to the details, over and over. Our motions are circular. Nonlinear.”*

<sup>6</sup> Monroe M.A. Beach House, 2002/1<sup>st</sup> Gallery Books ed. p 59-60

<sup>7</sup> Monroe M.A. Beach House Memories, 2012/1<sup>st</sup> Gallery Books ed. p 66

<sup>8</sup> Monroe M.A. Beach House Memories, 2002/1<sup>st</sup> Gallery Books ed. p 3



While reading the book we can see that at that time women were more indulged in the family duties rather than having a job and earning a degree. When Olivia was at college studying biology, her marriage with Stratton makes her leave college at the first year. However she continues studying turtles, she finds the nature and turtles too intimate to herself. To her, the turtles have taught to develop a hard shell against gossips, naysayers, or those who want her to fail.

Another woman character with a strong will in the “Beach House Series” is Toy Sooner. At the beginning of the saga Monroe portrays this 18 year old simple girl more naïve and poor. The conversation between Toy and Cara gives the same implication in the Beach House( part 1):

*“I’m trying to figure so many things out right now,” she said, appearing a bit guilty. “It’s so confusing. I’m going to be a mother soon but I’m still just a kid, you know?” Her voice went higher. “I—I—What am I going to do with a baby? How can I take care of him?”<sup>9</sup>*

Yet the time shaped her as a woman of solid determinations. She's the kind of woman who wants the best for her loved ones, and for the better of society.

*After Olivia Rutledge died, Toy had worked hard every day of those five years to make a better life for herself and for Little Lovie, her daughter.*

*That had been a vow made at Miss Lovie’s gravesite and a promise to her infant daughter.*

*“I did my best to keep my vow,” she said aloud to Lovie Rutledge, feeling her spirit hovering close tonight. “I finished college, got a good job and I’ve made a nice home for Little Lovie. All tidy and cheery, with flowers on the table, like you taught me. I want so much to be a good mother.” She rested her chin on her knee with a ragged sigh as the longing from the dream resurfaced.<sup>10</sup>*

Toy Sooner has dealt with enough rough waves in her troubled past. It's only been through the enduring love of a close-knit group of women on this tiny island that she's finally started to find her footing. She starts working at the South Carolina Aquarium and loves her job that is to take care of species at the Aquarium. She is especially fond of the sea loggerheads and always is able to prove that she is capable of the responsibility. At the third part of the saga “Swimming Lessons” this character reveals herself coming out against particular difficulties. As new challenges in her career arise for this young single mother, the choices of her past will come up to her. Soon Toy will learn that, like the steadfast sea turtles she cares for, a mother must find the strength within herself to make it safely to shore.

Although known for her intimate portrayals of women's lives, Monroe’s writing has gained added purpose and depth with her move to the South Carolina Lowcountry:

*“Living on Isle of Palms provides a stimulating place for me to think and to write. I’ve always been interested in nature, but living on the island and near the wetlands has influenced by work. I draw themes for my novels from nature and the parallels with human nature. And, in my own small way, I hope that by bringing to life the beauty and mystery of this fabulously varied ecosystem and various endangered species in my stories, readers will perhaps be inspired to support efforts to protect them.”<sup>11</sup>* The following extract from the novel “Beach House” confirms a powerful kinship between human and animals:

*The turtle finished laying her eggs and began shoveling sand into the nest with her hind flippers. Then she turned and tossed sand violently to camouflage her treasures. Lovie and Cara stepped back, giving her a wide berth to finish hiding her nest.*

*The loggerhead was steadfast as one by one more than one hundred leathery eggs slipped into the sand. While she worked, great streams of salty tears flowed down from her eyes.*

<sup>9</sup> Monroe M.A. Beach House, 2002/1<sup>st</sup> Gallery Books ed. p 376

<sup>10</sup> Monroe M.A. Swimming Lessons”, 2007/1<sup>st</sup> Gallery Books ed.pp 10-11

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.maryalicemonroe.com/“Mary Alice Monroe Books page”>. Archived from [the original](#) on 2008-08-02.





*A mother's tears, Lovie thought to herself. The tears of duty, love and commitment. The tears of resignation and acceptance. And, too, the tears of abandonment. For this sea turtle would finish laying her eggs then leave the nest, never to return.*<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

It also could be concluded that cultural Eco-feminist point to form value for woman and nature will be given value bases and be independent living beings. Barbara shattered the stereotypical image of women and addresses her with strength, wisdom, and rebellious spirit of exploring themselves. There is an extrinsic relation and comparison between nature and female characters shown by the author. Birds, flowers, fire and most importantly water is very much associated with Taylor and other characters as well. Various themes have been explored by the author as, racial discrimination, women friendship, marriage and sex, self-growth, evil and goodness etc. Barbara's eco-feminist concern for nature has rarely been studied. Barbara's "The Been Trees" shows the relationship between female and nature from the peculiar angle of a woman writer. She also shows the victimized status of both women and nature.

Mary Alice Monroe has created a family saga about relationships, courage, nature, and life lessons as the legacy passes from one generation to the next. Marking a considerable development in her evolution as a novelist, in "Beach House Series" the author artfully blends both women's fiction with environmental messages and metaphors—thus tying together her life as a writer and conservationist. Reading about the emotional dynamics of a mother-daughter relationship with a conservationist's efforts to protect endangered loggerhead sea turtles we discover what is most important in life.

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<sup>12</sup> Monroe M.A. Beach House, 2002/1<sup>st</sup> Gallery Books ed. p 144

