
RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Every Quiet Step is Thunder to Beetle Life Underfoot”: Redefining the Misrepresentations in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*

B. Mercy Gnanabai¹ ✉ and Dr. S. Meena Rani²

¹Research Scholar, Dr. M. G. R. Educational and Research Institute, Chennai – 600095, INDIA

²Professor, Department of English, Dr. M. G. R. Educational and Research Institute, Chennai – 95, INDIA

Corresponding Author: B. Mercy Gnanabai, **E-mail:** merhepv04@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Misrepresentation is providing false information about someone or something, often to deceive or gain an advantage. Fraudulent misrepresentation is one of the most serious forms of misrepresentation, which involves deliberate deceit and can result in the contract being voided and damages being sought. Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Prodigal Summer* challenges traditional misrepresentations by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings. With the metaphor ‘Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot,’ Kingsolver highlights the profound impact of seemingly insignificant human actions on the ecosystem. The first discussion concerns the novel’s female characters, Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie, and how they redefine traditional farming instead of the men, who are often misrepresented as using harmful modern agricultural systems. The second discussion is about how men use the land for commercial purposes. Deanna actively protects natural wildlife, such as coyotes, and maintains domestic animals to support ecological balance. Lusa and Nannie are organic farmers who cultivate their vegetable and fruit land for the benefit of their families. Eddie used to hunt animals, especially coyotes, while Garnett preferred modern agricultural systems for economic gain. However, both actions have an impact on the environment and its beings. Kingsolver supports the natural environment and expresses this through her female characters, who resist the actions of men.

KEYWORDS

Resistance, Pesticides, Agriculture, Wildlife Protection, Ecological Balance.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 September 2024

PUBLISHED: 27 September 2024

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2024.7.10.3

1. Introduction

During World War II, the term ‘resistance’ came into use, but it has multiple meanings. This paper focuses on the meaning of physical opposition to psychological defense mechanisms and even political movements against oppressive forces. When ‘resistance’ is used in literature, it becomes a literary theory. Resistance in literature has evolved into a theory that explores untold narratives and marginalized voices within literary works. Edmund Burke was the first to introduce the term ‘resistance’ in his book *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Resistance theory is part of political theory, focusing on the right to resist authority, and has been formulated as resistance to the magistrate, which represents legal authority, including the head of state. The oppressors dominate in both ways, physically and psychologically, so the concerned person who suffers initiates resistance against them.

The quote “Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot” is attributed to Barbara Kingsolver. It conveys the idea that even our smallest actions and movements can significantly impact the world around us. This highlights the interconnectedness of all living beings and the profound effect of our presence on nature. Every step we take, no matter how insignificant it may seem, can disrupt the delicate balance of life, affecting creatures such as beetles, which we may not even be aware of. The phrase “Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot” relates to the theme of redefining misrepresentations in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel,

Prodigal Summer. This quote signifies the profound impact of human actions on the natural world, highlighting how even seemingly insignificant actions can have significant consequences for the ecosystem. Furthermore, the context of the novel underscores the interconnectedness between humans and nature, emphasizing the need to reconsider traditional views that have often marginalized or misunderstood the role of women and nature.

When we talk about ‘redefining the misrepresentations,’ we refer to identifying and correcting false or misleading statements, particularly in legal agreements like contracts. The meaning of the phrase varies across different contexts. Initially used in law, it later found application in other fields, including literature. Barbara Kingsolver uses this phrase to describe how men mistreat the lives of both women and nature. In *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver expresses her views through characters like Eddie Bondo and Cole Widener, who mistreat their wives, Deanna Wolfe and Lusa Maluf Landowski, as well as through Garnett Walker, who imposes his ideas on his neighbor, Nannie Rawley. The three female characters—Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie—are educated and have extensive knowledge of agriculture, which they learned from their parents and through their practice of organic farming. In contrast, the male characters—Eddie Bondo, Cole Widener, and Garnett Walker—exploit women and nature for entertainment and economic gain. These men pursue modern agricultural practices and hunt animals with rifles, leading to the degradation of biodiversity. In response, the female characters are compelled to protect and maintain the ecological balance of the forest and the environment.

2. Literature Review

Barbara Kingsolver is a renowned author of novels such as *Prodigal Summer*. Her books delve into intricate themes that connect human experiences with nature and challenge traditional narratives. By doing so, Kingsolver offers a refreshing perspective on the relationship between individuals and the environment. She writes in a political and feminist style that gives even more depth to her work. Kingsolver explores exploiting nature and oppressing women in various ways by men considered ecofeminism. Narduzzi contends that *Prodigal Summer* accentuates the interdependence of human existence and the environment by exploiting ecological relationships to show how all living things are interconnected. She draws attention to how the landscape the characters live on influences them and how their development reflects the cycles of the natural world. This article highlights how Kingsolver’s story implies that love, remembrance, and renewal can emerge from a harmonious relationship with nature, where the land itself becomes a source of healing and reconciliation (Narduzzi, 2008).

Hawkins focuses on the characters’ relationships with nature in *Prodigal Summer*, demonstrating how these bonds inspire resilience and rejection of modern farming techniques. He claims that the novel promotes ecological balance and opposes the exploitation of natural resources. Hawkins investigates how Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* depicts resistance to environmental deterioration and the societal norms that lead to it. The thesis uses an ecocritical framework to examine the interdependence of humans and nature, focusing on how Kingsolver’s characters embody resistance (Hawkins, 2015). Hirsch examines how the novel *Prodigal Summer* uses character development, plot structure, and thematic aspects to express the symbiosis of feminist and environmental issues. She emphasises Kingsolver’s approach to the influence of human activities on the environment, as well as the critical role of women in pushing for ecological preservation. The thesis also investigates the symbolic usage of nature to reflect the characters’ inward transformations and societal critiques. In *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver depicts characters that defy patriarchal and industrial standards, linking their conflicts with ecological knowledge (Hirsch 2017). Warren argues that a patriarchal worldview that views women and nature as resources to be exploited is tied to the dominance of men over the natural world, as Glazebrook illustrates. Warren argues for an ecofeminist ethic that acknowledges the inherent dignity of both women and nature and criticises conventional Western ethical frameworks for failing to address these interwoven oppressions. Glazebrook draws attention to Warren’s pluralistic approach, which builds a more comprehensive understanding of oppression by combining ideas from many feminist theories and environmental ethics (Glazebrook, 2002).

3. Findings

Kingsolver’s work in *Prodigal Summer* challenges stereotypes and explores the relationships between gender, nature, and spirituality. The novel portrays three women who strive to break free from societal norms that dictate dominance and control over women and nature. By depicting these women as individuals who seek to establish their identities and connections with the environment on their terms, Kingsolver prompts readers to reflect on how humans interact with each other and the natural world. The quote captures the essence of the novel’s message, accentuating the significance of every action and its impact on the delicate balance of nature. It serves as a reminder of the power dynamics in human-nature relationships and the importance of reevaluating our perceptions to foster a more harmonious coexistence with the environment.

3.1 Misrepresentation of Men

“Women are described in animal terms as pets, cows, sows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, old hens, mother hens, pussycats, cats, cheetahs, bird-brains, and harebrains . . . ‘Mother Nature’ is raped, mastered, conquered, mined; her secrets are ‘penetrated,’ her ‘womb’ is to be put into the service of the ‘man of science.’ Virgin timber is felled and cut down; fertile soil is

tilled, and land that lies 'fallow' is 'barren,' useless. The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing them; the exploitation of women is justified by naturalizing them" (Warren, 37).

Karen Warren's passage delves into the enduring link between the exploitation of women and nature, highlighting the resemblance between these two forms of oppression. She argues that language and metaphors play a crucial role in perpetuating these oppressions. Women are often depicted as derogatory and objectified, while nature is portrayed as a female entity, 'Mother Nature,' subject to exploitation. This feminization of nature mirrors the patriarchal control exerted over women, while women are 'naturalized,' equated with their connection to the natural world, justifying their subjugation in society. Warren's analysis suggests that both forms of oppression reinforce each other within a patriarchal system. This insight is central to ecofeminism, which aims to dismantle the ideologies that justify the exploitation of women and the environment.

In *Prodigal Summer*, Deanna is a forest ranger at National Zebulon Forest. She believes Eddie and has an affair with him. Bondo prefers her to pursue her every movement of protecting the living beings of the forest and his aim to hunt every animal, especially the coyotes and its family, "Shoot every Coyote, screw every woman, see the world, she thought: the strategy of prolonged adolescence. If you find any Coyote pup around here and kill them" (*Prodigal Summer*, 182-4). Cole Widener and Garnett Walker prefer modern agricultural practices, using chemical substances like Selvin. Widener and Walker prefer chemical substances to kill the weeds, pests, and insects in the agricultural land. Widener develops the tobacco farm and Garnett develops the American Chestnut plantation.

3.2 Nature as a Central Theme

Kingsolver's narrative immerses readers in the vibrant natural world of southern Appalachia, where the characters' lives intertwine with the rhythms of the forest. The constant hum of the forest, depicted through buzzing insects, howling coyotes, and mating moths, serves as a backdrop to the characters' stories, emphasizing the inextricable link between human existence and the natural environment. Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie emphasize nature because nature is solace to them, nurtures and sustains them, and leads them to protect nature even for future generations. Deanna loses her marriage's life and volunteers herself to work in the forest area. Lusa desires to pursue traditional farming, but her husband dominates her, so after his death, she is educated more about vocational agriculture at Future Farmers of America (FFA). Protecting her family is a great responsibility of Lusa, so she works and spends a lot of time on her agricultural land, which provides her peace and happiness.

3.3 Redefining Misrepresentations

The characters in *Prodigal Summer* embody different perspectives on nature and human impact. Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie represent varying attitudes towards the environment, reflecting Kingsolver's exploration of the consequences of misrepresentations and misunderstandings in human-nature relationships. Through their interactions and conflicts, Kingsolver challenges traditional views and advocates for a more harmonious coexistence with nature. *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver delves into the theme of misrepresentation in traditional narratives about rural life, farming, and environmentalism. The novel uses characters like Lusa, Deanna, and Nannie to redefine these stereotypes. Lusa, a city-bred woman who inherits a tobacco farm, confronts the romanticized views but eventually learns to appreciate and integrate sustainable practices. Her journey highlights the contrast between superficial stereotypes and the nuanced realities of modern farming.

3.4 Interconnectedness and Impact

The quote 'Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot' symbolizes the ripple effect of human actions on the delicate balance of nature. Kingsolver's narrative underscores the profound impact of individual choices on the ecosystem, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between humans, wildlife, and the environment. By redefining misrepresentations and advocating for a more respectful relationship with nature, Kingsolver prompts readers to reflect on their role in preserving the natural world. *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver explores the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and agriculture through the lives of its characters. The novel highlights how individual actions and decisions affect the ecosystem and personal relationships. The protagonist, Lusa, struggles to balance traditional farming practices with environmental sustainability, highlighting the impact of agriculture on ecosystems. Garnett Walker's mentorship emphasizes the link between responsible farming and ecological health, demonstrating how agricultural education can shape a more harmonious relationship with nature. His teachings about sustainable practices and conservation are rooted in the principles of the FFA, demonstrating how agricultural education can shape a more harmonious relationship with nature. The novel also highlights the intricate web of life through the characters' connections to their land and each other, emphasizing the importance of understanding this interconnectedness for fostering environmental stewardship and resilience.

3.5 Political and Ecological Resistance

Kingsolver's thematic exploration of resistance, both political and ecological, underscores the importance of challenging oppressive systems and advocating for environmental stewardship. Through her characters' actions and dilemmas, she highlights the inherent

inequities faced by marginalized groups like Hispanic, Native American, and African individuals, subtly weaving these elements into the fabric of her narratives. Deanna resisted her marriage life, divorced professor, and led a new life in the forest. Lusa resisted the modern agricultural systems and the proposal of her uncle, Rickie. Nannie is an old woman who knows sustainable agriculture and creates an identity – NO SPRAY ZONE- and she learned the secrets of agriculture from her parents. Nannie Rawley resisted her neighbour’s conventional farming system.

She emphasises the significance of each species’ place in the ecosystem as a way to show her resistance to tyrants. Her statement, “Loss of one kind of Salamander would be a tragedy” (Prodigal Summer, 217), reflects a deep ecological perspective.

4. Discussions

Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* explores the complex relationship between human activities and environmental issues in rural areas. The ‘quiet steps’ symbolize the impact of human activities on the environment, highlighting the common misrepresentation of their impact. The characters’ interactions with the land and their creatures reveal the intricate connections between human actions and environmental outcomes. Kingsolver redefines misrepresentations by presenting rural areas as active, dynamic environments where every action has significance, encouraging a deeper appreciation of the subtle yet profound impacts of human life on the natural world.

5. Conclusion

Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* is an ecofeminist novel that challenges oppressive norms and promotes a harmonious relationship between individuals and their environment. The novel uses feminist, ecofeminist, and political narratives to challenge traditional narratives and promote environmental consciousness. The female characters, Lusa, Deanna, and Nannie, represent nature as a dynamic and responsive entity, demonstrating a shift from exploitation to respectful interaction. By correcting misrepresentations, Kingsolver encourages a deeper understanding of ecological systems and mindful stewardship, promoting a more harmonious relationship between individuals and their environment.

The novel’s focus on ecological misrepresentations may overlook Kingsolver’s deeper commentary on human interconnectedness with nature. The narrative’s subtler ecofeminist and biophilic themes, where human and non-human interactions are reciprocal, may be overlooked. The concept of ‘misrepresentations’ may be subjective and dependent on specific ecological or philosophical frameworks. The analysis may lack nuance without considering multiple perspectives, such as indigenous or alternative ecological knowledge systems. The focus on environmental misrepresentations may also under-analyse character arcs and interpersonal relationships.

Future research could combine environmental science and ecofeminist literary analysis to better understand human-nature interactions in *Prodigal Summer*. Comparing the text with other ecofeminist texts or Kingsolver’s works could reveal patterns of ecological misrepresentation and offer insights into the author’s evolving environmental perspective. Investigating how Indigenous ecological knowledge intersects with Kingsolver’s depictions of nature could offer alternative frameworks for redefining human-nature relationships. Expanding the research to include social misrepresentations related to gender, power, and rural life in the Appalachian setting would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the novel’s ecofeminist dimensions.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher’s Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Gnanabai, B. M., & Dr. Meena R S. (2023). Resisting Modern Agricultural Practices and Urge to Practice Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*. *Journal of Advanced Zoology*, 44(3), 1207–1214. <https://doi.org/10.17762/jaz.v44i3.1385>.
- [2] Gnanabai, B. M., & Rani, M. (2024). Nature’s Daughters: Empowerment and Environmental Stewardship in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* and *Flight Behavior*. *Canadian Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 4(4), 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.53103/cjlls.v4i4.172>.
- [3] Glazebrook, T. (2002) Karen Warren’s Ecofeminism. *Ethics and the Environment*, 7, 2, 2002, 12–26. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339034>.
- [4] Narduzzi, D (2008) Living with Ghosts, Loving the Land: Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 15, 2, 2008, 59–81. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44086722>.
- [5] Hawkins, B. T. (n.d) Charged with resistance: An Ecocritical Reading of Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* and *Flight Behavior*. Unpublished master’s thesis. Appalachian State University, Boone, NC. <https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/listing.aspx?id=18777>.
- [6] Hirsch, S J., (2017) Protecting Systems of Nature and Gender: Ecofeminism in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer* and Ruth Ozeki’s *All Over Creation* (2017). All Student Theses. 103. <https://opus.govst.edu/theses/103>.
- [7] Kingsolver, B. (2000), *Prodigal Summer*. London: Faber and Faber.
- [8] Warren, K J., (2000), *Ecofeminism Philosophy: A Western Perspective on what it is and why it Matters*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.