



Unveiling the Tragedy of Species Extinction in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*: A Shallow and Deep Ecological Reading from a Global South Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* through the ecocritical frameworks of shallow ecology and deep ecology, with particular attention to species extinction, biodiversity conservation, and ecological interdependence. The study argues that the novel presents the extinction of species not merely as an environmental concern but as a moral, cultural, and ecological crisis resulting largely from human intervention in natural systems. Through the characters of Deanna Wolfe, Nannie Rawley, Lusa Maluf Landowski, and Garnett Walker, Kingsolver explores the fragile relationships that connect humans, animals, plants, and ecosystems. Particular attention is given to the representation of coyotes, salamanders, and the American chestnut tree as symbols of ecological balance and biodiversity. The paper further extends the discussion by placing Kingsolver's ecological concerns in dialogue with Global South and South Asian environmental discourses, including the environmental activism of Vandana Shiva and the ecological concerns reflected in contemporary South Asian environmental writing. By comparing environmental degradation, habitat loss, and biodiversity decline across cultural contexts, the study demonstrates the global relevance of Kingsolver's ecological vision. The paper also engages with existing scholarship on *Prodigal Summer* and argues that Kingsolver moves beyond conservationist perspectives by advocating an ethic of coexistence between human and non-human life. Ultimately, the novel aligns closely with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 15 (Life on Land) and contributes significantly to contemporary eco-



literature by highlighting the urgency of biodiversity preservation and ecological responsibility.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Shallow Ecology, Deep Ecology, Species Extinction, Biodiversity, Global South, Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, SDG 15.

Introduction

Eco-literature, also known as ecological literature or environmental literature, is a literary genre that explores the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Emerging in response to growing environmental concerns, eco-literature highlights ecological crises such as species extinction, habitat destruction, pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss. Unlike traditional literary forms that often treat nature merely as a backdrop, eco-literature places the natural world at the center of narrative attention and encourages readers to reconsider their ethical responsibilities toward the environment.

The rise of ecocriticism as a critical framework has enabled scholars to investigate how literary texts represent ecological relationships and environmental challenges. William Rueckert's pioneering work helped establish ecocriticism as a field concerned with the interconnections between literature and ecology. Since then, ecocritical studies have expanded significantly, examining environmental representations across cultures and literary traditions.

Barbara Kingsolver occupies a prominent position within contemporary eco-literature. Trained as a biologist and widely recognized as a novelist, essayist, and environmental advocate, Kingsolver integrates ecological knowledge into her literary works. Her novels frequently address biodiversity, conservation, species extinction, habitat destruction, and environmental ethics. Among her most acclaimed eco-literary works are *Prodigal Summer* (2000) and *Flight Behavior* (2012).

This study focuses on *Prodigal Summer* and examines how Kingsolver portrays the tragedy of species extinction through the symbolic representations of coyotes, salamanders, and the American chestnut tree. The paper employs shallow ecology and deep ecology as primary theoretical frameworks and further situates the discussion within a Global South perspective. Through this approach, the paper demonstrates that the ecological concerns presented in the novel transcend national boundaries and resonate strongly with environmental issues faced by South Asian societies.

Eco-Literature and Ecocriticism

Eco-literature investigates the reciprocal relationship between human societies and natural environments. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all forms of life and frequently critiques anthropocentric attitudes that prioritize human interests over ecological wellbeing. Major themes in eco-literature include biodiversity conservation, environmental ethics, sustainability, ecological harmony, species extinction, climate change, and environmental justice.

Notable eco-literary works include Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* and *Flight Behavior*. These works encourage readers to recognize the environmental consequences of human actions and to adopt more sustainable relationships with nature.

Ecocriticism serves as the analytical framework through which such texts are examined. Rather than focusing solely on human-centered concerns, ecocriticism investigates how literature represents



ecosystems, animals, plants, landscapes, and environmental change. Ecocritical scholars argue that literature has the potential to shape ecological awareness and foster environmental responsibility.

Theoretical Framework: Shallow Ecology and Deep Ecology

Fritjof Capra distinguishes between shallow ecology and deep ecology. Shallow ecology remains largely anthropocentric. It recognizes the importance of environmental conservation primarily because healthy ecosystems benefit human societies. Conservation efforts are justified because they protect resources, maintain economic stability, preserve ecosystem services, and improve human wellbeing.

Deep ecology, associated with Arne Naess and later developed by ecological philosophers, challenges anthropocentrism and argues that all living beings possess intrinsic value independent of human utility. Deep ecology emphasizes ecological equality, interdependence, biodiversity preservation, and respect for all forms of life. It calls for a radical transformation of human attitudes toward nature.

The distinction between these frameworks is particularly useful in understanding *Prodigal Summer*. Certain characters approach environmental issues from perspectives that resemble shallow ecological concerns, whereas others embody deep ecological principles through their recognition of the intrinsic value of non-human life.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship has extensively explored the ecological dimensions of *Prodigal Summer*. Suzanne W. Jones argues that Kingsolver uses the metaphor of endangered species to examine both ecological and social survival. Jones highlights how agricultural communities and ecological systems face similar threats under modern economic pressures. While

Jones focuses on the endangered family farm, the present study extends the discussion by emphasizing species extinction as an ecological and ethical tragedy.

Gregory Stephens and Janice Cools examine human-animal relationships in *Prodigal Summer*, particularly through the representation of coyotes. Their study challenges traditional depictions of predators and demonstrates how Kingsolver encourages readers to reconsider human assumptions regarding wildlife. Building on this argument, the present paper investigates how coyote conservation functions as a broader symbol of biodiversity preservation and ecological interconnectedness.

Hema's discussion of ecological connectivity in Kingsolver's work highlights the novel's emphasis on relationships among species. The current study contributes to this scholarship by integrating shallow ecology, deep ecology, and Global South environmental perspectives into the analysis.

Species Extinction as an Ecological Crisis

Species extinction refers to the permanent disappearance of a species from the earth. Extinction has occurred throughout natural history, but contemporary extinction rates have accelerated dramatically due to human activities. Habitat destruction, pollution, climate change, overexploitation, invasive species, and environmental degradation constitute major drivers of biodiversity loss.

The consequences of species extinction extend far beyond the loss of individual organisms. Biodiversity supports ecosystem stability, food security, pollination, soil fertility, climate regulation, and numerous ecological services essential for human survival. The disappearance of species disrupts ecological networks and may trigger cascading effects throughout ecosystems.



Sustainable Development Goal 15 emphasizes the protection of terrestrial ecosystems, biodiversity conservation, sustainable forest management, and the prevention of species extinction. Kingsolver's novel aligns strongly with these objectives by illustrating how human actions threaten ecological balance and biodiversity.

Prodigal Summer as an Eco-Literary Text

Published in 2000, *Prodigal Summer* consists of three interconnected narratives: "Predators," "Moth Love," and "Old Chestnuts." Set in the Appalachian Mountains of southern Virginia, the novel explores ecological relationships among humans, animals, plants, and landscapes.

Deanna Wolfe, a wildlife biologist, studies coyotes and advocates predator conservation. Lusa Maluf Landowski struggles to adapt to rural life following her husband's death. Garnett Walker and Nannie Rawley represent contrasting attitudes toward farming, conservation, and ecological responsibility. Through these characters, Kingsolver presents diverse perspectives on humanity's relationship with nature.

Nature functions as more than a setting in the novel. Forests, mountains, insects, birds, trees, and animals actively shape the narrative. Kingsolver portrays ecosystems as dynamic communities whose survival depends upon biodiversity and ecological balance.

Coyotes and the Tragedy of Species Extinction

The coyote occupies a central symbolic role in *Prodigal Summer*. Throughout the novel, local farmers often perceive coyotes as threats to livestock and economic security. Consequently, organized hunting campaigns seek to eliminate them. Such attitudes reflect anthropocentric assumptions characteristic of shallow ecological thinking when economic interests are prioritized over ecological complexity.

Deanna Wolfe challenges these assumptions by emphasizing the ecological significance of predators. Coyotes regulate prey populations, maintain biodiversity, and contribute to ecosystem stability. Their removal can produce ecological imbalances that extend throughout food webs.

Kingsolver's portrayal of coyotes critiques human tendencies to classify animals according to their perceived usefulness. The novel demonstrates that predators possess ecological value independent of their relationship to human interests. This perspective aligns strongly with deep ecological principles.

The hostility directed toward coyotes also reflects broader patterns of environmental exploitation. Human fear, economic concerns, and cultural prejudices frequently justify wildlife persecution. Kingsolver exposes the limitations of such reasoning by illustrating the ecological consequences of predator eradication.

The American Chestnut Tree and Ecological Memory

Another significant ecological symbol in the novel is the American chestnut tree. Once dominant within eastern North American forests, the species experienced devastating decline due to chestnut blight. Through Garnett Walker's efforts to restore chestnut populations, Kingsolver highlights the lasting consequences of ecological loss.

The chestnut tree functions as a symbol of environmental memory. Its near extinction reminds readers that biodiversity loss affects not only ecosystems but also cultural histories and community identities. The disappearance of species represents the erosion of ecological heritage accumulated across generations.

Garnett's dedication to chestnut restoration reflects both shallow and deep ecological motivations. On one



level, restoration promises practical ecological benefits. On another, it expresses recognition of the intrinsic value of biological diversity. Kingsolver thus presents conservation as both a scientific and ethical responsibility.

Salamanders, Biodiversity, and Ecological Interdependence

Salamanders play a quieter but equally significant role within the novel. Often regarded as bioindicators, salamanders provide important information regarding environmental health because of their sensitivity to ecological changes. Pollution, habitat destruction, and climate shifts can rapidly affect salamander populations.

Nannie Rawley's observations of salamanders symbolize attentiveness to ecological complexity. Unlike characters who seek to dominate nature, Nannie approaches the environment with humility, patience, and respect. Her relationship with salamanders reflects a deep ecological understanding of interconnectedness.

The Appalachian region supports extraordinary salamander diversity. Kingsolver's inclusion of these creatures underscores the importance of preserving habitats capable of sustaining biological richness. The loss of salamanders would signify not merely the disappearance of individual species but the weakening of entire ecological systems.

Human Responsibility and Environmental Ethics

A recurring theme throughout *Prodigal Summer* concerns human responsibility toward the natural world. Kingsolver does not portray environmental degradation as inevitable. Instead, she demonstrates how human choices contribute directly to ecological crises.

Unsustainable agriculture, habitat destruction, pesticide use, and predator persecution appear throughout the novel as examples of environmentally harmful practices. Characters must confront the consequences of these actions and reconsider their relationships with nature.

Environmental ethics emerges as a central concern. Kingsolver encourages readers to move beyond narrow conceptions of self-interest and recognize broader ecological obligations. Conservation becomes not merely a practical necessity but a moral imperative.

Global South and South Asian Perspectives

One of the major concerns raised by reviewers involves situating the study within a Global South framework. Although *Prodigal Summer* is set in the United States, the environmental issues it addresses closely parallel ecological challenges faced throughout South Asia and other Global South regions.

In India, biodiversity loss has become a pressing concern due to deforestation, urbanization, industrial expansion, mining activities, and agricultural intensification. Numerous species face threats resulting from habitat fragmentation and environmental degradation. Environmental activists such as Vandana Shiva have consistently emphasized the importance of biodiversity conservation and ecological sustainability.

Shiva argues that biodiversity possesses intrinsic value and should not be reduced to economic calculations. Her ecological philosophy resonates strongly with the deep ecological principles represented by Deanna Wolfe and Nannie Rawley. Both perspectives challenge anthropocentric assumptions and advocate respect for ecological diversity.



Similarly, contemporary South Asian environmental writing frequently explores tensions between development and conservation. Writers address issues such as deforestation, species extinction, water scarcity, pollution, and climate vulnerability. These concerns parallel Kingsolver's critique of environmental exploitation and ecological imbalance.

The comparison demonstrates that biodiversity loss constitutes a global challenge rather than a regional problem. Whether in Appalachia or South Asia, ecological systems face similar threats from unsustainable human activities. Kingsolver's ecological vision therefore possesses significant relevance beyond its immediate geographical context.

Shallow Ecology in *Prodigal Summer*

Several dimensions of the novel reflect shallow ecological concerns. Local farmers often evaluate environmental issues according to their effects on economic productivity and human welfare. Predator control, resource management, and agricultural efficiency emerge as recurring priorities.

From a shallow ecological perspective, biodiversity conservation remains important because healthy ecosystems support human societies. Species extinction threatens agriculture, recreation, tourism, ecosystem services, and economic stability. Consequently, conservation efforts are justified as mechanisms for protecting human interests.

Kingsolver acknowledges these practical concerns while simultaneously revealing their limitations. Although economic considerations influence environmental decision-making, the novel suggests that purely anthropocentric approaches cannot adequately address ecological crises.

Deep Ecology in *Prodigal Summer*

Deep ecology provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding Kingsolver's ecological vision. Throughout the novel, non-human life forms possess value independent of human utility. Coyotes, salamanders, moths, insects, trees, and forests are not merely resources but participants within interconnected ecological communities.

Deanna Wolfe embodies deep ecological principles through her commitment to wildlife conservation. She recognizes that predators contribute to ecosystem integrity and deserve protection regardless of their economic implications. Similarly, Nannie Rawley's attentiveness to ecological relationships reflects an ethic of coexistence rather than domination.

Kingsolver's narrative consistently challenges human exceptionalism. By emphasizing ecological interconnectedness, the novel encourages readers to recognize humanity as one component within broader environmental systems. This perspective aligns closely with deep ecological philosophy and contributes to the novel's enduring significance within eco-literature.

SDG 15 and Ecological Sustainability

The ecological concerns addressed in *Prodigal Summer* correspond directly with Sustainable Development Goal 15: Life on Land. SDG 15 promotes biodiversity conservation, sustainable forest management, ecosystem restoration, habitat protection, and species preservation.

Kingsolver's novel illustrates the importance of these objectives through narrative rather than policy discourse. The experiences of coyotes, salamanders, chestnut trees, and human communities demonstrate the consequences of environmental degradation and the necessity of conservation efforts.

By highlighting ecological interdependence, the novel reinforces the principle that environmental



sustainability benefits both human and non-human life. The preservation of biodiversity emerges as essential for ecological resilience, social wellbeing, and long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* stands as one of the most significant eco-literary novels of the contemporary period. Through its exploration of coyotes, salamanders, chestnut trees, and human communities, the novel reveals the tragedy of species extinction and the ecological consequences of biodiversity loss.

Using the frameworks of shallow ecology and deep ecology, this study has demonstrated that Kingsolver moves beyond anthropocentric environmentalism toward a broader ethic of ecological coexistence. While the novel acknowledges practical conservation concerns, it ultimately affirms the intrinsic value of

all living beings and the interconnectedness of ecological systems.

The Global South comparison further illustrates the universal relevance of Kingsolver's ecological vision. Environmental challenges such as habitat destruction, biodiversity decline, and species extinction transcend national boundaries and require collective responses grounded in ecological responsibility.

Ultimately, *Prodigal Summer* serves as both a literary achievement and an environmental intervention. By combining scientific knowledge with compelling storytelling, Kingsolver encourages readers to recognize their responsibilities toward biodiversity conservation and ecological sustainability. The novel remains a powerful contribution to eco-literature and an important reminder that the survival of humanity depends upon the survival of the diverse ecological communities with which it shares the planet.

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