

Return to Nature: On Postmodern Ecological Paradigm from Prodigal Summer

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Abstract

The accelerating pace of modernization has intensified ecological degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change, raising urgent concerns about humanity's relationship with nature. Against this backdrop, ecocriticism and postmodern ecological theory provide critical perspectives for rethinking anthropocentrism and emphasizing ecological holism. This paper examines Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* through a close reading of its characters, plot, and ecological metaphors. The analysis highlights how the novel critiques anthropocentric values, illustrates the interdependence of human and non-human life, and articulates a vision of coexistence that transcends instrumental rationality. By situating literary representation within broader ecological discourse, the study demonstrates how cultural narratives can contribute to constructing a postmodern ecological paradigm. The findings suggest that literature not only reflects ecological ethics but also offers alternative imaginaries for sustainable development. Ultimately, this research underscores the significance of integrating traditional wisdom with contemporary ecological thought to foster a more balanced relationship between humanity and the natural environment.

Keywords

Prodigal Summer; Anthropocentrism; Ecological Holism; Postmodern Ecological Paradigm; Ecocriticism.

1. Introduction

In the age of accelerating modernization, the relationship between human beings and nature has become increasingly strained. Industrial expansion, technological progress, and the pursuit of economic growth have brought material abundance, but they have also generated unprecedented ecological challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. Traditional anthropocentric worldviews, which place human needs above all else, have contributed to this imbalance by neglecting the intrinsic value of non-human life. In response, ecocriticism and postmodern ecological theory call for a rethinking of humanity's place in the ecosystem and emphasize the interdependence of all forms of life. Literature provides a unique perspective for such reflections, as narratives often embody cultural values and offer alternative visions of human-nature interactions. This paper takes Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* as its primary text to explore how literary representation can illuminate ecological ethics. By examining characters, plotlines, and metaphors, the study reveals how the novel critiques anthropocentrism, promotes ecological holism, and suggests pathways toward a postmodern ecological paradigm. In doing so, it not only contributes to literary studies but also resonates with broader ecological discourse, urging a reconsideration of modern civilization's developmental model and its potential for sustainable coexistence with nature.

2. Methodology

This study adopts an ecocritical framework to examine the ways in which literature reflects and reconfigures ecological thought. By applying close reading to Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, the analysis explores how narrative strategies, character development, and ecological metaphors convey critiques of anthropocentrism and promote ecological holism. The methodological approach combines textual analysis with theoretical perspectives drawn from postmodern ecological philosophy and environmental ethics. This interdisciplinary lens enables the research to move beyond simple plot description, situating the novel within wider debates about modernity, sustainability, and human–nature relationships.

3. Ecological Crisis

The discussion of ecological crisis is essential to understanding the broader context in which *Prodigal Summer* is situated, as the novel reflects contemporary anxieties about environmental degradation and the unsustainable trajectory of modern civilization.

With the acceleration of modernization and the continuous development of science and technology, the over-exploitation of natural resources and environmental pollution are becoming more and more serious. Global climate change, species extinction and land desertification are gradually aggravating the impact of ecological crisis and becoming major challenges facing the world. Modern society relies too much on technology and industrialized production, which not only enhances material wealth, but also gradually destroys the ecosystem. Industrialization and urbanization bring excessive consumption of resources and environmental pollution, which in turn aggravate the decline of the ecosystem and form a vicious circle.

With the increasing desire to control nature, human beings have neglected the interdependence between species and environment in the ecosystem. This simple pursuit of economic growth and technological progress has led to the intensification of the ecological crisis. Over-exploitation of nature and neglect of ecological balance make the relationship between human beings and nature more and more alienated, which in turn affects the sustainable development of society.

4. Criticism of Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism is a mainstream thought in modernity, which holds that everything in nature should serve human needs. This way of thinking ignores the value of nature itself and only pays attention to the interests of human beings. The problems of resource exploitation, environmental pollution and species extinction in modern society are the result of this way of thinking. Land ethics fundamentally dispels anthropocentrism. "Land ethics has changed the role of human beings and transformed people from conquerors of the land community into ordinary members and citizens in the community. This means that human beings should respect other fellow members as well as the community itself" (Leopold, 1970:240). In *Prodigal Summer*, the actions of Lusa and Diana reflect the criticism of this anthropocentrism. According to Lusa, the ecological damage brought by modernization is not only an infringement on nature, but also a self-destruction of human future living environment (Kingsolver, 2000:284).

Kinsovo is good at comparing animals with humans to dispel anthropocentrism. "Lusa sat there motionless, full of surprise: this is how moths communicate. They can talk to each other across the field by smell. Moths have no mouthparts, so it is impossible to say the wrong thing; Whether the spouse is there or not, we all know each other well; Even in the dark, you can still find each other." Lusa, a doctor of entomology, has a special liking for studying insects, especially moths. She found that moths use smell, that is, pheromones, as clues to find and

determine their partners, and she found that some human behaviors are also made under the influence of pheromones. So Lusa compared her love life with the courtship of moths, which is an almost instinctive love. "Even if he never returned to this house, even if, like many local farmers, he had a tractor accident because of the rugged and steep terrain here, she could still find Cole's position in the simplest and most direct way with the fragrance floating in the distance. (Kingsolver,2000:284)"

Diana's love for Eddie is so consistent with human instinct. She compares the process of sex with Eddie to orchids or bees, and emphasizes that they have no more choices than animals. This process of comparison with animals shows the similarity between human beings and animals, and holds that human beings are not superior and noble than other species.

In *Prodigal Summer*, garnett, the representative of anthropocentrism, wants to uproot the oak tree that fell on his site. Nanny objected, "Oh, why on earth? Will this tree do any harm to the trees over there? Raccoons can use it as a bridge, salamanders will like to live under its rotten branches, and woodpeckers will be very happy to see it "(Kingsolver,2000:284). In human history, conquerors often bring about their own destruction, because they always assume what is valuable from their own perspective. And everyone's perspective is limited, and the conqueror can't realize the value outside his perspective. Like human beings trying to conquer the earth, they often fail in the end.

5. Ecological Holism

In "*Prodigal Summer*", Eddie always took it for granted that Diana was a vegetarian who opposed hunting, so he was surprised to see that she was very eager to eat the wild turkey he caught. Diana explained: "Eddie, predation is also a sacred act, which can weed out the old and weak individuals and control the explosive growth of population. Predation is respectable "(Kingsolver,2000:317). Predators in the food chain not only control the number of prey, but also maintain ecological balance. Diana's attitude in favor of hunting stems from her whole ecological consciousness, and she loves the whole population. Animals should have the right to survive and continue in their own way "(Kingsolver,2000:177).

Ecological holism emphasizes the balance of various species and their relationships in the ecosystem and advocates looking at environmental problems from a holistic perspective. In *Prodigal Summer*, Diana, as an ecologist, knows the importance of every life form in nature. She believes that predatory animals such as wolves are the key to ecological balance. Although some people think they pose a threat to agriculture, they actually help control some species in the food chain, thus maintaining ecological balance. If we ignore the regulating function of wolves on the ecosystem, the evil consequences caused by hunting wolves in large numbers will appear: animals that need to be protected, such as sheep or deer, will step on the path on the slope and eat the buds of shrubs and young trees. In the end, the deer that had hoped to be protected starved to death because of too many. This kind of thought is opposite to anthropocentrism, which is common in modern society, and emphasizes the diversity and complexity of ecology.

In this context, ecological holism advocates the harmonious coexistence between man and nature by protecting the ecological environment and restoring biodiversity. It requires human beings to no longer regard themselves as the masters of nature, but as a part of the ecosystem and share the resources of this planet with other creatures. There are many similarities between western ecological thoughts and China's traditional concept of "the unity of man and nature". Both of them emphasize the internal relationship between human beings and nature and call on us to respect nature and maintain ecological balance.

6. Imbalance Between "Instrumental Rationality" and "Value Rationality"

Since modern times, Descartes has established the subjective philosophy, and established the subjective position that man dominates nature, holding that nature is only a machine, emphasizing the development of man's own value and the control and utilization of natural value. Philosophers such as Kant and Hegel also believe that man and nature have the status of ruling and being ruled. It can be said that "the continuous conquest of nature by reason gave birth to the initial concept of progress and development in the West".

Modernity is biased towards "instrumental rationality". Due to the pursuit of rapid development of science and technology and rapid growth of GDP, human material wealth is constantly enriched. On the one hand, however, with the improvement of productivity and the continuous development of science and technology, too many artificial products hinder the natural evolution of ecological processes and destroy the original order of natural development. People have become accustomed to using chemicals that harm nature and destroy the environment. Farmers can't wait to use herbicides and pesticides to uproot all living things except crops, regardless of pests or beneficial insects, regardless of whether they affect the normal life of human beings. Lusa is very sorry about this in "*Prodigal Summer*": "Everyone sprays pesticides on their own fields. These beautiful little creatures will be killed. It's like throwing a bomb into the city just to kill a few bad guys. (Kingsolver,2000:177)"

On the other hand, modernity ignores "value rationality", which makes rationality a tool of desire and leads to the decline of social morality. The form of modern civilization dominated by capital follows the basic law of survival of the fittest and the law of the jungle. All people's activities are inseparable from capitalist social production, and the core element of their members' life is money. In "*Prodigal Summer*", Eddie Bondo only thinks about his own sheep, ignoring the lives of other populations in the world, and even eyeing coyotes for a prize of 10 thousand dollars; On the other hand, Diana doesn't care about the salary, but puts all its energy into protecting the ecological chain of the whole region. Although modernity freed human beings from medieval asceticism, it also put them in the cage of desire.

Practice has proved that if "instrumental rationality" expands and "value rationality" is missing, it will cause a series of moral problems. The fundamental problem of modern thinking lies in its instrumentalization and rationalization of nature, which emphasizes the domination of nature through science and technology and rationality, ignoring the inherent complexity of nature and the needs of human emotions. Under this framework, modern society is gradually alienated from nature, pursuing rapid development and technological innovation, but not paying attention to its long-term environmental impact. Lu Shuyuan believes that the environmental crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis and a cultural topic, which reflects the prejudice of mainstream human culture on the integrity of the relationship between man and nature. It is not a problem that can be solved only by science and technology, environmental regulations or administrative law enforcement. In "*Prodigal Summer*", Lusa's reflection is a profound query to this modern paradigm. She believes that the modernization promoted by science and technology and rationality is not invulnerable, which brings ecological imbalance and even intensifies the opposition between man and nature.

7. Harmonious Coexistence Between Man and Nature

In "*Prodigal Summer*", Diana lives alone in this mountain forest as a forest ranger. She has never taken a Chinese New Year holiday, and the time spent alone on the mountain is so long that government employees are worried. But instead of feeling lonely, she enjoys it. Because in her eyes, the partners who can communicate and accompany are not only human beings, but also animals and plants and the whole nature. "Every morning, put the hat on the boulder and

scatter the seeds on the edge of the hat, and the birds will get used to flying to peck. Over time, one day when she puts on her hat, she can walk around with a group of tits on her head. (Kingsolver,2000:284)"

When Eddie asked Diana if she missed the products of human civilization, she only replied, "Books, poems, paintings, chocolate, apple juice and sheepdogs." She doesn't know anything about the news at the foot of the mountain and shows no interest. She says that the world on the mountain hasn't changed much, and there will definitely be ups and downs, but in a slow and long life, they seem insignificant. "Her arms crossed and hugged herself." I think that's why I like it here. Nature is safer. " I'm just an outsider, just observing. They are busy with their own trivial and noisy little things. Their plan is to keep life on the earth, and that's what they do their best. (Kingsolver,2000:284)"

"The so-called solitude is just an illusion of human beings. Light footsteps, even if it is just a step, are like thunder to beetles on the soles of their feet. (Kingsolver,2000:284) "Diana thinks that the civilization that Eddie and others think is not the civilized world in her mind, and she loves the bookworm's awe and appreciation of nature everywhere. Nature includes everything, and natural things are almost everywhere. When human beings are no longer self-righteous and obsessed with anthropocentrism, they will realize the same fresh life and nature around them.

8. Constructing a Postmodern Ecological Paradigm

Diana's full and peaceful mentality is in sharp contrast with modern people's impetuous and lonely mentality. Due to the interference and influence of urbanization, people lack the opportunity to get close to and understand nature, and people are indifferent, alienated and denied to nature when they are far away from nature. In "*Prodigal Summer*", a new generation of children growing up in the countryside don't know the most common insects around them, but only know all kinds of urban dramas. Lusa can't help but feel surprised and sad. In the materialistic modern city, people seem to forget the existence of nature, and blindly follow the unlimited desire of human beings to catch up with the pace of the times, and nature will only get farther and farther away from human beings.

However, as Cole said: "Nature has disappeared in a place for 50 years, and people there will sentimentally treat it as a close relative they have never met and mourn for it. (Kingsolver,2000:284) "Modern industrial cities have also brought a series of problems to people's lives, such as crowded houses, traffic jams, air pollution, etc. People have begun to realize the value of nature, thus returning to nature, embracing nature and establishing contact with nature. In recent years, content producers represented by Li Ziqi have embarked on the track of "country life". Presenting the beauty of the east and the beauty of the countryside in an idyllic way, modern urbanites living in cement forests have found a "spiritual home", which meets the psychological demands of many people. From these videos, we find that more and more places have gone out of the traditional development path of "attaching importance to production, ignoring life and ignoring ecology". Isn't this people's farewell and reflection on the past development mode and lifestyle? This way of life urges people to actively participate in the cause of preventing the alienation between people and things, people and themselves, and the opposition between people and nature, alleviating and completely eradicating the meaningless life purpose and inner anxiety of modern people.

Returning to nature does not mean being completely separated from the city. In "*Prodigal Summer*", Lusa needs to sell his sheep to the city; Nanni insisted on planting apples without any herbicides and pesticides, and was certified by organic farmers. The fruits and vegetables she planted were sold in supermarkets, but they were more popular with people. Therefore, cities should not be isolated from nature, but should be green ecological cities that coexist with nature. The relationship between human life and ecosystem should be cooperation, mutual assistance

and symbiosis. The development of civilization must include ecological protection, and the development of cities is no exception.

9. Conclusion

Under the background of global ecological deterioration, the relationship between man and nature needs to be re-examined. In the process of ecological restoration and social transformation in the future, we not only need to repair the destroyed natural environment, but also need to deeply reflect on the concept and development model of modern civilization and explore a more balanced and sustainable development path. Although the rapid development of modern society has brought material abundance, it has neglected the deep respect and understanding of nature. We urgently need to change the human-centered thinking mode and advocate a more respectful and ecological lifestyle.

Prodigal Summer provides us with a reflection on nature and lifestyle, which advocates not a simple return to nature, but a profound reflection on modern lifestyle and a return to spiritual pursuit. By combining traditional wisdom with modern ecological ethics, it may provide us with a more sustainable way of life and make human beings live in harmony with nature. We should not only attach importance to environmental protection, but also cultivate new ecological consciousness, so that people can establish a sense of responsibility and belonging to ecology. Only in this way can the real harmony between man and nature be realized. Especially, the education of the younger generation is very important. They are the successors of the future ecological sustainable development. Only by letting them establish a correct ecological concept from an early age can we bring hope to the future of the earth.

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