

Environmental Justice in *Animal Dreams*

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Abstract

Faced with the deterioration of the environment in her hometown, Codi, along with her town fellows, begins to devote herself to the local environmental justice movement which aims to confirm the equality between mankind and nature, and the equal access to natural resources for the sake of sustainable development in the community. By educating her students about the seriousness of the ecological crisis, inspired by the understanding of place of her Native Indian boyfriend, Codi works with her people for cultural activism and finally succeeds in winning the fight for environmental justice.

Keywords: Environmental justice, Equality, Cultural activism

1. Introduction

When *Animal Dreams* was published in 1990, it soon became a popular and critical success as the novel won an American Library Association Notable Book and Best Book for Young Adults, Pen/USA West Fiction Award, *New York Times* Notable Book and Edward Abbey Award for Ecofiction. Thanks to the triumph of the book, the Kentucky-born author Barbara Kingsolver rises to prominence and becomes an important voice among the southwestern writers in the United States.

As a matter of fact, a variety of critical views have been presented with regard to the acceptance of *Animal Dreams* which relates the homecoming experience of the protagonist Codi. Based on her book *Holding the Line* which covers the great Arizona mine strike of 1983, the novel, through the characterization of Codi and her female town fellows devoted to the protection of their homeland ecological system, is considered as an ecofeminist fiction incorporating the themes of female autonomy and ecology. For example, Paul Gray contends that the novel is “an entertaining distillation of eco-feminist materials” (1990, see the website). Likewise, Houston and Warren argue that *Animal Dreams* is one of Kingsolver’s works that unfold a blending of “environmental fiction and feminism known as ecofeminism” (2009, p. 4). In addition, the acquisition of a sense of place is another perspective that some scholars are interested in. According to Roberta Rubenstein, Codi’s longing for belonging can be illustrated in two dimensions, namely, “the longing for the idealized lost mother and her association with the lost home/land” and the longing for “connection to a collective cultural history and home” (2001, p. 38). Moreover, some scholars have undertaken an interdisciplinary study on the novel. Take Rinda West for example, she adopts an ecopsychological approach to the novel and regards *Animal Dreams* as “a novel of reinhabitation” underscoring “a psychological trauma with a damaged land” in pursuit of recovery (2007, p. 150). Of the wide array of critical analyses, few of them associate the local efforts of saving the seriously polluted hometown with a form of the environmental justice movement which is contributing to the improvement of the world in terms of the equality for all human beings and between mankind and nature. This inadequacy gives rise to the present paper in which environmental justice is taken into consideration.

2. Environmental Justice

According to Richard Hofrichter, environmental justice is about “social transformation directed toward meeting human need and enhancing the quality of life...using resources sustainably” (1993, p. 4-5). Its central principle stresses “equal access to natural resources and the right to clean air and water, adequate health care, affordable shelter, and a safe workplace” (ibid.). As a matter of fact, environmental justice takes into account two dimensions: the equality between mankind and nature, and the equality of all human beings. In another word, the practice to call for environmental justice is a movement in the West which tends to incorporate “ecological issues into a larger

social-justice agenda” (ibid.). First, people are expected to engage in sustainable development. Instead of spoiling natural resources for selfish reasons pompously as the master of the earth, human beings should pay due respect to nonhuman nature while ensuring our own quality of life. Second, all the people should have equal access to healthy food and safe shelters, etc. However, the fact is that the underprivileged such as the colored, the poor, and many women, are more likely to become victims of nuclear waste, industrial landfill, and numerous other pollutants. Under this condition, people are encouraged to re-think the issue of environmental justice and make efforts to ensure the availability of safe and healthy environment for all the people.

In reality, the efforts in *Animal Dreams* on the part of the protagonist Codi Homero and her hometown fellows is a form of environmental justice movement launched for the rejuvenation of the endangered place by protecting it from the toxic threat of the mining company. As is known, the novel relates the homecoming experience of Codi, during which she begins to work with the grassroots organization—the Stitch and Bitch Club—to save her seriously polluted hometown, Grace in Arizona. While arguing for the equality between mankind and nature, Codi, with her people in the hometown, try to fight against the Black Mountain Company, the source of environmental injustice which can be evidenced in the degradation of the environment and the dismissal of human rights.

2.1 *The Equality between Mankind and Nature*

Indeed, the equality between human beings and animals, as an important part of environmental justice, has set the keynote for the whole story. The title of the book already implies that human beings are animals: they are by no means superior to animals. Instead, whatever they do, they are not different from animals. Just as Codi claims, “we’re born like every other mammal and we live our whole lives around disguised animal thoughts” (Kingsolver, 1990, p. 118). So Codi professes inwardly her desire for a restored intimate relationship between herself and her ex-boyfriend, Loyd Peregrina the Native Indian who used to be responsible for her pregnancy during her high school years. After their first sexual intercourse during her homecoming journey, Codi relates her pleasure to such effect that “I felt like a patch of dry ground that had been rained on” (130). In addition, Codi also learns from Loyd that people, like animals, can only dream about what they do when they are awake. In Western traditions, human beings have often been required to transcend their despicable position as animals and make a difference by being rational *Homo Sapiens*. However, people can never satisfy this wishful desire because even in dreams we still live within our limitations as an animal. If we experience pains and sufferings, we cannot repress them even in dreams. Take Codi’s miscarriage for example, she has always been haunted by the dream in which she is making painstaking efforts to lift a baby too heavy for her to catch. So it is an undeniable fact that human beings are in reality animals.

Furthermore, Codi, after having elapsed in the forgetfulness of her past supporter of animal rights, begins to restore her bond with animals by regaining her memories as an animal lover and showing her concern about the welfare of animals in her daily life. For a long time, Codi assumes that she is different from her younger sister Hallie in that she herself is indifferent to nature while Hallie is a fervent supporter of animal rights. Codi remembers that it is Hallie who insists on saving the abandoned coyote pups when both of them are stranded in a flood during their childhood. But Hallie tells her in a letter that actually it is Codi herself who would rather save the pups at the cost of getting herself spanked by her father than give them up. On the first day during her homecoming stay in Grace, Codi witnesses how her delicate friend Emelina raises an axe to kill a rooster. Emelina is very surprised that Codi can tolerate the whole bloody scene without any disturbance because the then adolescent Codi used to organize a boycott against killing chickens in the hometown. But Codi has no memory of her past self involved in the welfare of animals. For her, it should be her sister Hallie who has such a “soft heart” that she would cry “if she stepped on a bug” (29). With the help of her sister and her friend, Codi begins to recover her memory of her past identity as an animal lover. When Codi talks with Loyd about the death of animals, she is suddenly overwhelmed by the memory of her desperate efforts to rescue the pups when she is only a child to the effect that “my ears filled with the roar of the flooded river and my nose with the strong stench of mud” (191). Besides, when she witnesses the bloody cockfighting in which the innocent cocks are taken advantage of by human beings and dying of internal wounds and hemorrhage, Codi shows her strong disapproval of Loyd’s involvement in the brutal game. When she vents out her misery for the death of her sister to a stranger in a bus, she unconsciously takes up the role of a nature lover by telling the stranger how to deal with pests in a sustainable manner in gardening. All these facts illustrate that Codi has recovered her past identity as a nature lover who maintains that nature has equal rights as human beings.

There is no doubt that the affirmation of the equality between mankind and nature is only a part of the efforts for environmental justice. According to the social ecologist Murray Bookchin, “the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human” (2005, p. 1). Therefore, social justice in terms of equality among all the people, is an important part of environmental justice.

2.2 Equality among All the People

When it comes to equality among all the people in the scope of environmental justice, it actually takes into consideration the equal access to clean air and water, safe food and affordable shelter, etc. In *Animal Dreams*, people's rights to clean water and healthy land are denied, which manifests the rampant social injustice which has put the underprivileged at risk. For the sake of their own survival and that of their future generations, the local people in Grace, including Codi, begin to fight for social justice for all as a part of their struggles for environmental justice.

2.2.1 Social Injustice

The degradation of the environment in Grace where the marginalized Hispanic people live proves that the exploitation of the mineral resources denies the local people access to clean water and thus put their livelihood in danger. Their struggles against the unsustainable development in the local minefield become a microscopic part of the environmental justice.

The marginalization of the local people, the majority of which are Hispanic, is closely related to their dangerous position as the victims of the environmental injustice in Grace. As the title of Chapter 7 reveals, Grace is the poison ground created by the Black Mountain Company, the emblem of the industrial capitalism. The exploitation and appropriation of the mineral resources have reduced the place to a ghost town or "a shipwreck" (122). Indeed, it is Codi herself who recognizes the subtle changes in the fruit trees: before the fruits are ripe enough, they already fall onto the ground, with "tiny, immature nuts" (56). Later, she hears the heated discussion among the local people about the fruit drop and knows that the Black Mountain Company is culpable for the poisoned river which has negative impact on the fruit produce. What is more complicated is that the company, in order to avert the punishment of the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), intends to dam up and divert the river so that the poisoned water will not go through Grace. Without water, the local people, who were cheated out of the water rights many years ago, have no other choice but to relocate. They will become "refugees...turned out from here like pennies from a pocket" (149). In this sense, the development in the name of the progress of civilization in the West is what Vandana Shiva calls "maldevelopment" which is characteristic of a "fragmented, reductionist, dualist perspective" that places man over nature (1988, p. 6). Nature becomes the resources subjected to the domination of anthropocentric men. Besides, the whole process of exploiting the natural resources is also the process of marginalizing the underprivileged. For the local people who have no idea about their inviolable rights to property legislated in the constitution, they are deceived by the company to sell their water rights at an extremely low price. The imminent death of Grace indeed is a consequence of the social and economical development in the West. For the poor Hispanic people in *Animal Dreams*, they can no longer continue their subsistence economy in the orchards. Instead, they have to depend on the mining company for a livelihood at the cost of their own health and the well-being of the land. It is mentioned that the father of J.T. died of lung cancer after his forty years of drudgery in the smelter. In truth, the acknowledgement of the dying place is an important element that motivates Codi and her town fellows into action.

2.2.2 Fight for Social Justice

Faced with the imminent death of nature and their own injustice in the whole process, Codi and her town fellows make all the efforts to save their hometown. As is shown, different ways are resorted to in the fight for environmental justice.

First, Codi's changes in her attitudes toward her relationship with her hometown help her identify with the place where she was born and account for her engagement in the education about the seriousness of the pollution and the cultural rejuvenation for the improvement of her hometown. At the outset, Codi is only an observer who stands outside Grace witnessing the unfortunate changes, and a listener who hears people's concerns over their ruined home. She considers herself a person who does not belong to the "lost continent" (64). She takes in the symptoms of an endangered place, feeling unaffected. She refers to the place as "the Sahara" poisoned by a large quantity of sulfuric acid (65). However, she begins to become a participant in the local environmental justice movement. As Codi becomes a teacher teaching in her former high school biology, she uses what she has learned to confirm the death of nature in Grace. In the classes, she leads her students to conduct experiments on the samples of water taken from the local river, she is filled with "a strange panic to see that stillness under powerful magnification" of the microscopes: the absence of "the teeming microscopic world of a dirty river" proves that the local water is "dead" (109-110). Her further experiments on the PH of the water testify to the fact that the "canary" system of protozoans in the life of a river is dead (110). And the death of water is affecting the life of animals in the river: the frogs are extremely easy to catch. So Codi predicts that "next year there would not even be fish or frogs in the river; these particular representatives of the animal kingdom were headed for extinction" (148). The alarm given by Codi

virtually prompts the protagonist to fight for the survival of her hometown and encourages the community members to stand more firmly for their equal rights to have access to clean water and healthy land.

Second, Codi is more determined to be involved in the environmental justice movement because she has been inspired by Loyd's alternative understanding of place. In accordance with Heise, Loyd Peregrina "most clearly embodies the novel's ideal environmental ethic" on account of his profound place attachment (2008, p. 392). In contrast to the dominant ideology that people can own a place, Loyd maintains that a place owns people. To him, Anglos are "like turtles" carrying the whole house along if they go to other places whereas his people are "like coyotes" who come home to a good place by turning around three times in the grass (1990, p. 235). Besides, he points out to Codi that to be home is not necessarily to be in the same place. What matters is whether people can accommodate with it. For his people, they build the houses "the earth could embrace" (211). As it is an honor for people to accept mortality, it is the greatest honor for people to let a house "fall back down into the ground" (235). He takes Codi to Kinishba. In the eight-hundred-year-old prehistoric condos, the walls are virtually graveyards for dead babies. Loyd also takes Codi to the Spider Rock where they can see another village that reminds Codi of "cliff-swallow nests, or mud-dauber nests, or crystal gardens sprung from their own matrix: the perfect constructions of nature" (211). Native Indians' accommodation with nature is in sharp contrast with the domination of nature in the white culture, which is evidenced in the mining company in Grace. Just as Booth and Jacob comment, many American Indian cultures "adapted their needs to the capacities of natural communities; the new inhabitants, freshly out of Europe, adapted natural communities to meet their needs" (1990, p. 31). If the industrial capitalism tries to conquer nature in expansive space to meet their insatiable demands for the maximization of profits, many Native Indian cultures maintain the reverence for the agency of nature while establishing their ties to the place where they inhabit. These lead to different results. As Codi has questioned, "So how come this canyon's stayed productive for a thousand and some-odd years, and we can't even live in Grace for one century without screwing it up?" (215) Moreover, Loyd's place attachment is not confined to one singular place. As one of the Native Indians, he believes that "home is often a much broader and shared concept" (Lippard, 1997, p. 27). When he is asked by Codi what it is worth for him to die for, he answers with "the land" (122). For him, the land does not refer to the reductionist understanding of his reservation or the property he owns. It is a broader issue concerning the positive intra-actions between people and the land. If one reaches beyond his/her dwelling place, he/she is also moving free from the reductionist understanding of a fixed, unchanging place, and extends the caring responsibilities for all places. This is an important part of the place principle of environmental justice advocated by Val Plumwood:

an injunction to cherish and care for your places, but without in the process destroying or degrading any other places, where 'other places' includes other human places, but also other species' places. (147)

However, the environmental injustice in *Animal Dreams* is committed against the welfare of the local people in Grace. To take advantage of the mineral resources in Codi's hometown, people in charge of the Black Mountain Company inflicts serious damage to the land regardless of the sufferings of the underprivileged. While destroying the place where nonhuman species depend on for survival, they also destroy the dwelling place where the local inhabitants live. In face of the enormous difficulty in fighting for environmental justice, Codi needs to work with her town fellows to save her hometown in addition to her own efforts in educating her students as well as maintaining a bond with the land by drawing inspiration from Loyd's alternative understanding of a place.

In reality, a very important strategy for the grass-roots organization led by women is cultural activism, which is a third element in the fight for environmental justice movement. According to Richard Hofrichter, culture "articulates human subjectivity, meaning, and a people's presence and identity in history" (1993: 90). By means of the creation and reaffirmation of community culture or cultural activism, more people will be mobilized for environmental justice and social development. During the course of the reinvigoration of the local culture, Codi becomes increasingly engaged. At first, Codi is surprised to be invited by the Stitch and Bitch Club to be one of the peacock ladies to sell the local handicraft, the piñatas. Still, she takes up the responsibility of driving the truck loaded with the peacock-feather-made artworks to Tucson, thinking that she just needs some relaxation outside the suffocating atmosphere in Grace. It proves that she is very good at selling the piñatas. Codi does not participate directly in the second round of cultural activism, but she is responsible for the "mimeographed broadside," which is to be attached to the piñatas, and which is to include the history of Grace as "an Eden of orchards in the idyllic days before the Black Mountain...lost to a poisoned river" (206). The story about the deterioration in Grace as well as the delicate artistic piñatas does attract people's attention. The CBS news come to Grace for an interview and, as mentioned in the above section, Dona Althea is asked to retell the story of the Gracela sisters. For Codi, that story is "the Genesis of Grace," a Biblical story in which nine Spanish sisters, along with some peacocks, come to the New World, marry some Mexican men, and give rise to the origin of the small town (267). Thanks to their efforts, Grace draws the attention of the public and succeeds in becoming one of the cultural heritages. Under the legal protection, Codi's

hometown will no longer be destroyed because the Black Mountain Company is forbidden to dam the river. This evidently shows that cultural activism is an effective method for the local people to fight for environmental justice.

3. Conclusion

Owing to the efforts of Codi and her town fellows, environmental justice is reasserted in Grace. By equating human beings to animals and regaining her past identity as a nature lover, Codi confirms that people are not different from animals and that we should take into consideration the rights of nature for sustainable development of all species. Moreover, by educating her students about the seriousness of the pollution in her hometown, inspired by the alternative understanding of place of her Native Indian boyfriend, Codi engages herself in the local environmental justice movement to fight for the equal access to clean water and healthy land. In the process, cultural activism, which is meant to instill into the local people the cultural repertoire of the hometown, is immensely helpful in the fight for the equality among all the people. Eventually, their efforts to fight for environmental justice pay off with Codi's hometown becoming one of the cultural heritages.

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