

A Critical Reappraisal of Ecocriticism, Eco-precarity, and Eco-spirituality in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 03 Jan 2026; Received in revised form: 01 Feb 2026; Accepted: 05 Feb 2026; Available online: 10 Feb 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Ecocriticism; Eco-precarity; Eco-spirituality; Postcolonial Ecology; Gendered Environmental Vulnerability; Indigenous Ecological Knowledge</p>	<p><i>Barbara Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible (1998) has been extensively examined as a postcolonial and feminist critique of missionary arrogance, patriarchal authority, and American imperialism. However, its ecological and spiritual dimensions have received comparatively limited attention, particularly through an integrated environmental humanities framework. This paper addresses this gap by analysing the novel through the combined lenses of ecocriticism, eco-precarity, and eco-spiritual theory. Employing close textual analysis, the study argues that Kingsolver presents ecology as inseparable from moral responsibility and spiritual consciousness. The Congolese landscape emerges not as a passive backdrop but as an active agent that resists anthropocentric and colonial domination. Through the concept of eco-precarity, the novel foregrounds uneven environmental vulnerability shaped by colonial exploitation, ideological rigidity, and socio-political instability, disproportionately affecting women and indigenous communities. Further, the paper demonstrates how Kingsolver critiques religious absolutism and advances an eco-spiritual ethic grounded in humility, interdependence, and coexistence. By integrating environmental agency, gendered vulnerability, and indigenous ecological knowledge, this study positions <i>The Poisonwood Bible</i> as a significant contribution to ecocritical and environmental humanities discourse.</i></p>

Introduction

The twenty-first century's growing ecological crises have forced academics to reconsider the cultural narratives that influence how people interact with the natural world. The shortcomings of anthropocentric worldviews that prioritize human dominance over ecological balance have been exposed by climate change, environmental degradation, and ecological injustice. In this situation, literature becomes a potent medium for rethinking sustainable forms of coexistence and challenging environmental ethics. As

a critical method, ecocriticism looks at how nature is portrayed in literature and questions ideological aspects that support environmental exploitation.

“Ecocriticism interrogates not merely representations of nature but the ideological structures that legitimise environmental exploitation and anthropocentric dominance” (Garrard 3; Buell 1145).

Interdisciplinary viewpoints like eco-precarity and eco-spirituality have been incorporated into ecocritical inquiry within the last 20 years. Eco-precarity shows disproportionate exposure to

environmental risk, ecological vulnerability, and instability, especially among colonized and oppressed people.

“Such ecological vulnerability is inseparable from histories of colonial exploitation, where environmental risk is unevenly distributed along lines of power and marginalisation” (Nixon 239; Nayar 42).

Social, political, and economic inequality are unavoidably connected to ecological deterioration. Contrarily, eco-spiritual philosophy challenges the strict division between the sacred and the natural world that permeates many Western religious traditions by fusing ecological awareness with spiritual and ethical principles. *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver (1998) offers a rich narrative landscape for this kind of multidisciplinary study. The Price family, American Baptist missionaries whose strict theological beliefs collide with the ecological, cultural, and spiritual realities of Africa, are the subject of this story, which is set in the Belgian Congo in the late colonial era. Kingsolver illustrates the shortcomings of environmental ignorance, religious dogmatism, and colonial intrusion through a variety of narrative voices.

The Poisonwood Bible's ecological imagination plays a crucial role in its ethical vision, though it has often been overshadowed by analyses of its postcolonial and feminist dimensions. This paper explores environmental agency, ecological vulnerability, and spiritual transformation, showing how Kingsolver constructs a deeply interwoven ecological ethic.

Scholars have extensively examined the novel's postcolonial politics, feminist narrative strategies, and critique of American exceptionalism. They highlight colonial power dynamics, Nathan Price's missionary conceit, and the ways multiple female narrators subvert patriarchal authority. Postcolonial studies often emphasize Africa as a space that resists Western domination and celebrates indigenous knowledge; yet, the natural world frequently appears only as a backdrop rather than as an active force shaping events.

Mary C. Mason notes the novel's concern with environmental interdependence, but ecological forces tend to be discussed symbolically rather than as agents influencing moral and political outcomes (Mason 226). Broader ecocritical scholarship

recognizes Kingsolver's commitment to sustainability, biodiversity, and human responsibility toward the environment. Frameworks like eco-precarity, which examine vulnerability and ecological risk in postcolonial contexts, remain largely underapplied to this work.

Similarly, eco-spiritual readings using deep ecology and eco-theology point to the link between spirituality and environmental ethics, yet the novel's spiritual engagement with nature is still underexplored. By integrating ecocriticism, eco-precarity, and eco-spiritual philosophy, this study considers how literature can depict human-nature relationships and underscore the ethical significance of ecological interconnectedness.

Ecocritical Analysis of Landscape and Agriculture

The African terrain is a dynamic and resistive force rather than a passive backdrop. The Price family's inability to grow crops using American farming techniques foregrounds how colonial knowledge systems and regional ecological realities are incompatible. Despite local villagers' cautions, Nathan Price insists on planting crops in straight rows, which leads to recurring failure and represents the conceit of putting foreign methods on an alien setting.

According to Kingsolver, non-human elements like dirt, rain, insects, and vegetation have agency. Human activity causes the soil to react aggressively, frequently with disastrous results. Floods, droughts, and crop failure demonstrate the limits of human control and support ecocritical arguments against interpreting nature as inanimate stuff. The environment becomes a force that necessitates humility, adaptability, and respect. Colonial ideologies often treat land as a controllable resource, a perspective ecocriticism critiques for legitimising environmental exploitation and epistemic violence against local ecologies (Huggan and Tiffin 9).

Eco-precarity and Environmental Vulnerability

According to modern environmental humanities definitions, eco-precarity illuminates the unequal distribution of environmental risk and the structural factors that worsen ecological vulnerability, especially for marginalized or colonial communities.

Eco-precarity foregrounds the uneven distribution of environmental risk, arguing that ecological instability disproportionately affects colonised and marginalised

populations due to historical and structural inequalities (Nayar 41; Nixon 237). The story illustrates how vulnerability in the Congo arises from a complex interaction of colonial exploitation, environmental degradation, and socio-political instability rather than being solely the result of personal ignorance or bad luck. With its erratic weather patterns, unstable soil, dense foliage, and the complex interaction between its flora, wildlife, and human residents, the Congo is depicted as both a physical and symbolic landscape that exemplifies environmental precarity.

Kingsolver depicted the Price family's delicate connection to the environment. The family is positioned as ecologically vulnerable agents by Nathan Price's strict adherence to American farming practices and his denial of local ecological knowledge. Crop failures occur frequently as a result of their insistence on monoculture-style planting in the tropical soil, disregarding regional crop rotations and soil management strategies. Price's family were colonising the people with their ideology and established ecological and social systems by imposing foreign customs and beliefs, which has a domino effect on ecological resilience, human health, and agricultural output. This ecological misalignment illustrates the precarious consequences of imposing foreign knowledge systems on a landscape with its own intrinsic ecological rhythms. The ecological vulnerability arises not solely from natural hazards but also from the human failure to understand and adapt to the environment's inherent variability.

Postcolonial ecocriticism emphasises indigenous ecological knowledge as adaptive, place-based, and sustainable, often positioning it in direct opposition to Western developmental and missionary paradigms (Huggan and Tiffin 13).

The indigenous Congolese populations shown in the novel endure a type of chronic eco-precarity, formed by decades of colonial exploitation, in parallel to the Price family's hardships. Western religious, economic, and political structures interfere with the generations-old subsistence farming methods of the people. These disturbances increase vulnerability to hunger, illness, and resource scarcity in addition to analysing conventional ecological knowledge. Socio-political nature of environmental precarity, which is the outcome of colonial intervention, structural

inequality, and the imposition of external authority over local ecosystems. The Prices' incapacity to recognize ecological patterns contrasts strikingly with the villagers' adaptive planting and knowledge-sharing in response to environmental challenges, marks the relational nature of eco-precarity.

Environmental vulnerability is not a purely natural condition but a structurally produced one, intensified by ideological rigidity, political domination, and the suppression of indigenous adaptive knowledge systems (Nayar 55).

Agricultural techniques in the Congo are always uncertain due to the country's tropical climate, which is marked by unpredictable rainfall, flooding, and soil depletion. Despite not being human, these natural forces function as active agents that set boundaries for human behaviour, illustrating the interdependence of ecological and human systems. The environmental volatility is a crucial element influencing survival, interpersonal connections, and moral decision-making rather than just an abstract backdrop and morally significant state by showing how environmental factors impact social dynamics and humans.

Kingsolver examines the moral ramifications of human conceit, ideological dogma, and the disregard for local knowledge in the Price family's mistakes. The story illustrates the moral significance of environmental vulnerability: neglecting ecological boundaries and interdependencies results in material loss as well as spiritual and emotional pain. The novel presents cross-cultural ecological awareness, adaptive learning, and humility as essential reactions to environmental precarity. The novel's ongoing significance in ecocritical and environmental humanities discourse is reinforced by the narrative's adaptation, resilience, and interconnectedness, which offers a framework for comprehending eco-precarity as both a lived reality and an ethical necessity.

Gendered Eco-precarity

Vulnerability is a condition that is heavily mediated by gender rather than being neutral or uniform. The female characters are simultaneously subject to ecological risk, societal pressure, and moral obligation while Nathan Price exercises authority and is mostly immune from the immediate effects of environmental failure. The Price family's ecological fragility

primarily affects the female members, especially Orleanna and her daughters. As a caretaker, Orleanna deals with the practical and psychological effects of environmental instability, such as starvation, disease, and the devastating death of her youngest daughter, Ruth May.

The mother, Orleanna, represents the mental and physical toll that environmental precarity demands. She is thrown into running a household in uncertain and frequently hostile circumstances as soon as the family gets to the Congo. She has to deal with tropical illnesses, food and water shortages, and the difficulties of keeping clothes and shelter in a foreign environment. Her job as a mediator between the family and the local peasants, as well as between her authoritarian husband and their daughters, adds to these obligations. Orleanna's struggle serves as an example of how women's labour, which is frequently underappreciated, is essential to surviving in unstable ecological situations. Her lived experience, rather than scientific knowledge, heightens her awareness of ecological fragility, embodies social and aspects of gendered eco-precarity.

Ecofeminist theory argues that ecological vulnerability is frequently gendered, as women's embodied labour, caregiving roles, and proximity to subsistence practices expose them more directly to environmental instability (Gaard 29).

Ruth May, the youngest Price child, embodies the most tragic form of gendered and age-based ecological vulnerability. Her death results directly from the ecological ignorance and ideological rigidity imposed by Nathan Price, whose inflexibility generates conditions of heightened risk for those with the least agency. Kingsolver underscores this unequal distribution of ecological risk when the narrator reflects that "the smallest one was the first to be claimed" (Kingsolver 494). Ruth May's body thus bears the ultimate cost of ecological mismanagement and patriarchal authority, revealing how those with minimal power are disproportionately exposed to environmental harm.

In contrast, Leah's trajectory illustrates a movement from ecological vulnerability toward adaptive agency. Through sustained engagement with the land and the local community, she develops ecological literacy and a sense of moral responsibility toward the

environment. Her transformation is marked by an emerging humility and attentiveness, as she learns that survival depends on listening rather than control, recognising that Africa "taught me to listen instead of command" (Kingsolver 337). Leah's growth demonstrates that gendered eco-precarity can foster resilience and empowerment when it encourages adaptability and ecological awareness.

This contrast is reinforced through the depiction of Congolese women, whose intergenerational ecological knowledge sustains everyday survival. Their authority over land and labour is evident when the narrator notes that women "knew how to coax food from the soil when nothing else would grow" (Kingsolver 146), a knowledge that stands in sharp opposition to Nathan Price's rigid and uninformed methods.

The novel's gendered eco-precarity interacts with moral and spiritual aspects. Orleanna and her girls also had to deal with Nathan's ethical and religious expectations. The family's vulnerability is increased by his strict interpretation of Christianity, which rejects indigenous spiritual and ecological knowledge. The women's understanding of moral and ecological ramifications is linked in order to survive, they must pay attention to environmental cues and engage in moral contemplation regarding human responsibility to the land and community. The gendered perspective shows how vulnerability interacts with societal roles, expectations, and power structures and is experienced unevenly within human systems.

The Poisonwood Bible provides a powerful illustration of gendered eco-precarity, showing how women and dependent family members are disproportionately impacted by ecological instability. The necessity of taking social structures and lived experience into account in order to understand environmental fragility, Kingsolver strengthens the ecological criticism of colonialism.

Eco-spiritual Conflict and Transformation

One of the main targets of Kingsolver's criticism is religious absolutism. Nathan Price's evangelical fervour is a reflection of colonial control over both people and territory. Both spiritual and environmental plunder are justified by his strict division of the sacred from the natural. He has a theocentric worldview that rejects ecological

interconnectedness and sees nature as something to be subdued in God's name. Characters like Leah, on the other hand, experience eco-spiritual metamorphosis. Leah accepts a spirituality based on humility and coexistence after seeing the limitations of dogmatic rigidity in long-term interaction with the land and its inhabitants. Indigenous belief systems are shown to be more sensitive to ecological balance and spiritual connectivity, despite their cautious representation.

Environmental ethicists argue that rigid theocentric interpretations of religion have historically justified human domination over nature by separating the sacred from ecological interdependence (Taylor 226).

The Poisonwood Bible reveals the close connections between colonial violence, spiritual conceit, and ecological devastation. The ecological boundaries and moral responsibility, the novel questions Western notions of mastery. By proving that spiritual values and ecological ethics are together. While eco-spirituality reorients ethical responsibility toward coexistence rather than control, eco-precarious talks on vulnerability and instability.

I. SUMMATION

Comparative eco-spiritual assessments of *The Poisonwood Bible* and other postcolonial ecological narratives may be the focus of future research. Approaches including eco-theology, environmental anthropology, and indigenous philosophy could further elucidate the novel's ecological ethics. Such research would deepen understanding of literature's function in creating sustainable and spiritually informed ecological consciousness. The paper argued environmental agency, ecological vulnerability, and spiritual development, in *The Poisonwood Bible* articulates a comprehensive ecological ethics. The humility, interdependence, and moral responsibility for the natural world are encasing the dangers of anthropocentric and theocentric dominance. Kingsolver's novel is positioned as a crucial contribution to environmental humanities and modern ecological thought through an integrated critical ecocritical, eco-precarious, and eco-spiritual analysis.

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