

Reading and Teaching Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* as Postcolonial

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ABSTRACT

Can an American writer really be considered a "postcolonial" writer? Can a "White American" writer be considered postcolonial when in fact most theoretical positions associate American Literature with imperialism? Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* demonstrates that despite the ethnicity and nationality of a writer, a work can be considered "postcolonial in intent." Using the model of the postcolonial bildungsroman, we can see that though Kingsolver's character Leah is of U.S. nationality, she grows into an "Africanness" that seeks a liberation of the Congo from all forms of oppression, colonial, religious and neocolonial. I would like to posit that looking at the bildungsroman of the main character Leah and her identification with the Congolese, Zairians and Angolans and her effort to see herself as growing up together with Africa and into Africa helps to see her growth as a trope for the suffering of this continent.

The book jacket for Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* (1998) describes the novel as follows: "Taking its place alongside the classic works of postcolonial literature, this ambitious novel establishes Kingsolver as one of the most thoughtful and daring of modern writers". The word postcolonial occurs twice on the jacket: the book is also called "a suspenseful epic of three decades of reconstruction in postcolonial Africa". It is interesting also that the word "postcolonial" is used without hyphens or capitals. The term postcolonial has obviously been globalized. It is not as posited by Aijaz Ahmed (1995) and Mishra and Hodge (1991) specifically rooted in time or place. And as Peter Hulme might ask, "Can an

American writer really be considered a postcolonial writer?". Though after 1776 America could technically be considered postcolonial, having liberated itself from the British crown, the question today is whether a country can be considered postcolonial if it continues to have colonial "discursive practices which relate to occupied territory where the native population has been, or is to be, dispossessed of its land by whatever means" (Hulme, 1986: 2-3).

Barbara Kingsolver does not fit into any of our familiar theoretical paradigms. She is technically not from a postcolonial nation. She does not fit into the category of hybridity: she was not raised in Africa, though she does tell us in the preface to the book that she did spend a short time there as a young girl in the Congo; and she is not an expatriate, diaspora writer. Positioned as she is in affluent, Tucson, U.S.A., is this a work of postcolonial literature or is it yet another colonialist treatment of the "heart of Africa?" What would Chinua Achebe say?. To compound the matter, *The New York Times* review of the book written by Michiko Kakutani (October 16, 1998) both in the title and in the text made the implicit comparison to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Now this would place the work squarely in the tradition of imperialist literature, unless you read Conrad as I have done with Kipling's *Kim* as postcolonial in intent.¹ This is the sort of case where current literary and critical postcolonial theory fails us.

I would like to posit that looking at the *bildungsroman* of the main character Leah and her identification with the Congolese, Zairians, and Angolans, and her effort to see herself as growing up together with Africa and into Africa, and here I use the continental name almost as we use the name "Bharat Mata" (Mother India), helps us to see her growth as a trope for the suffering of Africa. So that even if she or the author (conflating the authorial voice into that of the character) may be from a colonizing race, because of the empathetic and sympathetic connection to the land and its people, we can look at this work metaphorically as "postcolonial". For this, I find it helpful to rely on Mishra and Hodge's distinction between "post-colonial" with a hyphen as referring to the immediate chronological moment of postcoloniality and "postcolonial" as referring to metaphoric postcoloniality. Mishra and Hodge too struggle with the issue of postcoloniality in settler colonies such as in their home base of Australia/New Zealand. But can we extend this same courtesy to Conrad? Most postcolonial critics would say emphatically, "No". Chinua Achebe's now famous essay, "An Image of Africa," lists all the instances of Conrad's mistreatment of Africa. Ania Loomba (1998:136) writes of *The Heart of Darkness*, "In this novel as in much colonialist fiction, Africa is a place where the European mind disintegrates and regresses into a primitive state. Africa, India, China and other alien lands induce madness, they are madness itself". This of course also happens to Nathan Price in Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*. But should this be a basis of passing judgment on the author?. After all, we do have Marlow criticizing empire and imperialism. There is the famous line, in Conrad (2000: 1960): "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much". Even as Marlow initially thinks of the Belgians he is going to work for, he is critical of them: "They were going to run an overseas empire and make no end of coin by trade" (2000: 1963). If we conflate

Marlow with Joseph Conrad and see the authorial voice as one criticizing the treatment of the natives by the Belgian ivory traders, can we plead that Conrad is not imperialistic, but postcolonial in intent, that he is criticizing the entire view of the world that incorporates everything from *craniology* to seeing the landscape as the "heart of darkness"?

But this of course raises the issue of who can speak for whom? Does a white person have the right to speak for the exploited native, whether exploited by ivory traders or diamond and oil miners? Complicating this issue is the fact that Barbara Kingsolver, a "white American," is speaking against the neo-colonial excesses of the leaders of "color" in postcolonial Africa -Mobutu for instance. Gayatri Spivak would ask, "Can the subaltern speak?". Even as Spivak posits in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that we need to get beyond binaries, she really does not allow for the racially different to speak for those whom she considers "subaltern." In fact, Spivak's book further polarizes the binaries between the western philosophers such as Hegel, Kant etc., the representatives of "The West and the non-West," as it were. So there definitely would not be room for a Kingsolver to write about Africa. But in fact she has. It is almost as though she anticipates that these questions would be asked of her. In the voice of the mother at the very opening of the book she says,

You'll say I walked across Africa with my wrists unshackled, and now I am one more soul walking free in a white skin, wearing some thread of the stolen goods: cotton or diamonds, freedom at the very least, prosperity. Some of us know how we came by our fortune and some of us don't, but we wear it all the same. There is only one question worth asking now: How do we aim to live with it (p. 9).

It is this, how we aim to live with what we have done, that Kingsolver sets out to describe and it is in this that her redemption from the charge of colonialism lies.

But she is also criticizing the Americans as she always does, for American intervention overseas, as she has done again in her new collection of essays, *Small Wonder* (2003: 239):

I've learned of things my government has done to the world that make me shudder: Covert assassinations of democratically elected leaders in Chile and the Congo; support of brutal dictators in dozens of nations because they smiled on our economic interests; training of torturers in a military camp in Georgia; secret support even of the rising Taliban in Afghanistan until that business came to a nasty end.

She extends this to post 9-11:

Our whole campaign against the Taliban, Afghan women's oppression and Osama bin Laden was undertaken without nearly enough public mention of our government's previous involvement with this wretched triumvirate, in service of a profitable would-be pipeline from the gas fields of Turkmenistan. If the CIA and some U.S. corporate heads are romancing the same ilk elsewhere, right now, for similar reasons, then this high minded talk of 'Enduring Freedom' is wearing thin on my patience (2003: 254).

Kingsolver later apologized for that remark about dropping the atomic bomb. But her intent it seems to me is clearly to raise the consciousness towards the liberation of the "African" peoples from all forms of external rule. Two months after she had written the death of Mobutu in the novel, and as she was revising the novel, Mobutu was in fact killed (BookPage Interview November 1998, www.bookpage.com). At a time of increasing U.S. involvement overseas, it is important that a book like *Poisonwood Bible* be read as postcolonial. I hope to make my case for the *bildungsroman* of Leah as showing the postcolonial intent of the work. Because our postcolonial theoretical categories seem to fail a work like this, I will rely mostly on literary analysis and archival interview information to make my case.

It is interesting here to note that a veritable genre of the "postcolonial novel" has emerged. A look at a series of novels described as postcolonial— from R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935) to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) to Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* shows a familiar pattern: a child (or a pair of twins) growing up at a moment of historical change, usually in a Third World country. The child who functions as the hero or heroine grows up seeing herself connected to the land and identifying with the growth or independence of the country which usually occurs at the moment of pubescent adolescence— so that coming of age literally also becomes synonymous with coming into an awareness of race/ ethnicity/ identity or nationalism. One almost wonders if the writers consciously read each other and are familiar with the pattern, or if the coming of age novel has become the novel of choice for expressing the coming of age of a country or an ethnicity within a country. Barbara Kingsolver's Leah Price, one half of a pair of twins, adopts Africa, marries Africa, the land where her youngest sister was buried as a child, stung by a snake, in a scene reminiscent of Paul Scott's *Day of the Scorpion*. Identifying with the African snake, "the glide of belly on branch," Leah says "I am *muntu* Africa, *muntu* one child and a million lost on the same day... Yes, you are all accomplices to the fall, and yes we are gone forever. Gone to ruin so strange it must be called by another name. Call it *muntu*: all that is here" (537). She, not the buried younger sister, has become Africa. How does this happen?

Nathan Price, the Kurtz of Barbara Kingsolver's "Heart of Darkness," arrives as a Baptist missionary in the Congo with his four daughters and his dutiful wife. He is committed to conversion and stays in Africa, whether he is committed to it or not, despite the death of his youngest child and despite his wife leaving him. Like a series of literary characters before him, Karen Blixen in *Out of Africa*, Ngugi wa Thiongo's Mr. Howlands, the pyrethrum plantation owner in *Weep Not, Child* and most importantly Kurtz, Conrad's "Mistah Kurtz," he begins to see the land as his own. The children call Nathan Price, "Our Father," and indeed he seems almost to be God-like in his colonization of the people whom he does not understand. He wants them to have good old fashioned baptisms by submersion and doesn't realize that they won't undertake this because they don't want to submerge themselves into a river filled with crocodiles and alligators. He wants to be sensitive to "native customs," as he calls them, and yet he sets himself apart from Catholic missionaries like Brother Fowles who, like Conrad's Mr. Kurtz had, "entered into unconventional

alliances with the local people" (38). Nathan kept himself apart, and yet he couldn't leave the land. He kept going deeper and deeper into the "heart of darkness," hoping to create what he thought was "the heart of light," a Christian nation. After Ruth May had died, and after his wife was gone, after the Methodists and the AFBM (the Baptist missions) had all gone, and with no women to look after him and his house burned down, he still insisted on trying to dunk Africans in the river. Unlike Conrad's Mistah Kurtz, who seemed genuinely to be loved by the natives and taken care of by the woman with "the helmeted head and the tawny cheeks" (2008), who didn't want to go back to Europe and awaited death among the natives and their dances, Nathan was burned to death by the "natives". "Nathan believed one thing above all else: that the Lord notices righteousness and rewards it" (200). He thought he was being righteous and loving towards the natives, when they were ready to kill him for murder: "So there was a really horrible incident on the river. A boat full of kids turned over by a croc, and all of them drowned or eaten or maimed. Father got the blame for it. Pretty much hung without a trial" (486). Leah recounts that "the people in the village had asked him to leave a hundred times" but committed as he was to his mission, he kept sneaking back wanting to take each child and baptize it in the river. So they chased him up a rickety watch tower and set him afire. Leah and her clubfooted twin Adah recall that he died in the manner of Bible verse he inflicted on his children, Second Maccabees 13:4, "for there is a tower there seventy feet high, filled with ashes, and there they push a man guilty of sacrilege or notorious for other crimes to destruction. By such a fate it came to pass that the transgressor died, not even getting burial in the ground" (487). Nathan, who had dedicated himself to what he saw as saving the people of the land, died a transgressor.

Nathan's death is marked in the book by Ariel's song to Ferdinand in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as Ariel tries to revive him and bring him on shore for Miranda: "Full fathom five thy father lies...". Like the prince in *The Little Mermaid*, Ferdinand is roused by the singing. But Barbara Kingsolver's novel is no colonial allegory. The girls are actually delighted their father is dead. They see the allegory instead with Nathan's five wives in the Bible. They want to go on to their own lives free not to be colonizers (like Leah) or free to be colonizers (like Rachel). This quotation in the text it seems to me is a distinct rejection of the colonial allegory, which is yet another literary device the marks this work as postcolonial.

Yes, Leah does not want to be associated with the colonizers or the imperialists from whom she has come. Instead it is Leah who wants the freedom to grow into the land. She marries Anatole, and marries herself to the cause of liberating both Zaire and Angola and who remains in Africa, despite her husband's imprisonments by Mobutu, as one "of Africa," as opposed to her very white, very American sister, Rachel who seems to remain in South Africa like the classic colonizer, exploiting the natives to build her hotel/bar, "The Equatorial," using the servants to get her chicken curry and flowers whenever she wants them. It is Rachel who seems to give us the answer to why various colonizers remained in the countries they came to colonize - why the many tea plantation owners didn't leave India, or the coffee planters didn't leave Kenya or even why Conrad's Kurtz and Kingsolver's Nathan hung on in Africa long after they were no longer welcomed. Rachel tells us, "I had

my bags packed more than once. But when push came to shove I was always afraid. Of what? Well, it's hard to explain. Scared I wouldn't be able to fit back in is the long and short of it" (513). Or again, "Did I ever think I would wind up here getting old? Not on your life. But here I am I've walked off more marriages and close calls than you can shake a stick at, but never got out of the Dark continent" (512). Rachel remains the colonizer. Like her father Nathan, she is there to bring "light" to the continent through her capitalist instincts. Nathan had meant to bring light through his religion. But it is Leah who brings the light -not through her skin that she is aware glows white, but through her empathetic connection with the true goals of liberation- liberation from her own country's interference in the politics of "the heart of Africa," from the oppression of the diamond and oil workers. She continued to be committed, long after the killing of Patrice Lumumba, to his goal: "We are going to make the Congo, for all of Africa, the heart of light" (184). But what is the "heart of light?" Unfortunately, as T.S. Eliot tells us in *The Wasteland*, it is silence: "... and I knew nothing ... looking into the heart of light, the silence" (2000: 2371).

Leah recalls going to Leopoldville with Nathan, to watch history in the making. She recalls Patrice Lumumba telling children to keep the date June 30th, 1960, the day of independence from Belgium in their hearts; but what the hearts had to have was silence. And yet it is in her own silent way, as a witness to history that it is "light" that Leah attempts to bring as she grows old in Angola, raises four sons, supports her revolutionary husband. She holds that "light" in her heart, even as hope seems to fail her and she seeks a place to raise her sons safely, "We were desperate to move our sons to a place where they could taste hope, at least, if not food" (502). The desperation is not for or about Africa. Instead it is, "No homeland I can claim as mine would blow up a struggling, distant country's hydroelectric dams and water pipes, inventing darkness and dysentery in the service of its ideals, and bury mines in every Angolan road that connected food with a hungry child. We've watched this with our hearts in our throats, knowing what there is to lose. Another Congo. Another wasted chance running like poisoned water under Africa, curling our souls into fists" (503). Or again, "It is thirty million dollars, Anatole told me recently, that the U.S. has now spent trying to bring down Angola's sovereignty. Every dollar of it had to come from some *person* a man or a woman. How does this happen?". Here Leah grows ashamed of her Americanness, ashamed of her association with the imperialistic instincts of her country and this is the awareness that her *bildungsroman* comes to. It is this final "aha phenomenon" of *not* being American that is the coming to awareness of Leah in *The Poisonwood Bible*. This is her *bildungsroman*-almost *anti-bildungsroman*. According to the German tradition, the hero/heroine has to grow into an awareness of nationalism-of belonging to a particular race and nation. Leah instead grows away from hers into another race and nation. But she does not do this as a hybrid. She becomes as African as her husband Anatole. This is in direct opposition to her sister Rachel- who also finds her home in Africa, albeit South Africa: "'Leah, for your information I am proud to be an American.' Adah just snorted again, but Leah smacked her forehead. 'How can you possibly say that? You haven't set foot there for half your life!' 'I have retained my citizenship. I still put up the American flag in the bar and celebrate every single Fourth of July.'" (479). Despite

being American and "white," Leah then connects to "black" Africa and finds her belonging there. In a scene almost reminiscent of Karen Blixen and Denis telling each other stories in Kenya, Leah and Anatole tell each other stories: "And in our bed, which Anatole calls the New Republic of Connubia, my husband tells me the history of the world. Usually we start with five hundred years ago, when the Portuguese came poking the nose of their little wooden ship into the mouth of the Congo River" (519). To this she adds, "I move my hands by day and by night, when my fever dreams come back and the river is miles below me, I stretch over the water, making that endless crossing, reaching for balance. I long to wake up and then I do. I wake up in love, and work my skin to darkness under the equatorial sun. I look at my four boys, who are the colors of silt loam dust and clay, an infinite palette for children of their own, and I understand that time erases whiteness altogether" (526). Leah has grown African and she has done so sanely unlike her father and unlike Conrad's Kurtz. She has "gone native" without "the potential unhinging" that postcolonial critics seek. Loomba notes that several critics do see Conrad's novel as a critique of imperialism; however, she feels that because it rehearses the primitivism of classical psychoanalysis, i.e., Kurtz goes mad in an equatorial setting, it is in fact colonialist. In my reading, I don't believe that Kurtz goes mad. He is instead, like Kingsolver's Rachel, fully sane and only unwilling to return. He would rather die in Africa than go back. Leah, on the other hand, makes the conscious, sane choice, seeing the wrongs of politics, to remain in Africa and not return to an imperialistic nation.

It is interesting to look at this textual and literary evidence as opposed to our critical theories to find this balance. We could ask, critically, is it all right to consider Kingsolver postcolonial since her heroine, Leah retains her sanity, despite her fevered dreams? Her father, we suppose like Conrad's Kurtz, did not retain his sanity. But could we conjecture that in their fevers Kurtz and Nathan, too sanely saw themselves as belonging to the land where their journeys along this central river had led them?

A journey along a river seems to be a central literary device in the postcolonial *bildungsroman*. In R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, Swami grows into his Indianness, in his flight along the Sarayu river. In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck Finn grows into his awareness as American along the Mississippi. In a gesture very like the novel presently under consideration, Kim in Kipling's novel by that title also begins to see himself as belonging to and around the Ganges.

The Congo is a central protagonist both in *Poisonwood Bible* and in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow spots it on a map, colored yellow, "and the river was there fascinating deadly -like a snake" (1963). In *Poisonwood Bible*, it draws with fascination, it leads into adventures, it leads finally to the disavowal of one's culture, as it did before with Kurtz. It de-racinates Leah. "SUNRISE TANTALIZE, evil eyes hypnotize: that is the morning Congo pink" (30), her sister Adah chants. The arriving children find that "Congo sprawls on the middle of the world. Sun rises, sun sets, six o'clock exactly" (30), but it invites them into mysteries, "the Congo is only a long path that takes you from one hidden place to another. Palm trees stand alongside of it looking down at you in shock, like too tall, frightened women with upright hair" (33). And Marlow had said, "Going up that river was like

traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings" (2000:1982). In both books, the Congo is compared to the rivers of the capital cities: in *Heart of Darkness* to the Thames, "also one of the dark places of the earth," (2000:1959) and in *Poisonwood Bible* to the Delaware in a very interesting passage reversing the presumptions of colonialism:

The great Delaware rolls on, while Mr. Washington himself is no longer what you'd call good compost. The Congo river being of a different temperament, drowned most of its conquerors outright... Call it oppression, complicity, stupefaction, call it what you like, it doesn't matter. Africa swallowed the conqueror's music and sang a new song of her own (385).

The Congo is not colonized. It is a colonizer.

Another literary device which defines the postcolonial novel is that of stylistic experimentation. Usually a writer writing from a culture such as that of India, or Africa, or of Ireland attempts to mold English to capture the rhythms of local speech and language. It is interesting that Kingsolver uses American dialect innovatively to portray the development of her characters. Rachel starts out speaking like a typical 1950's American teenager. Since Kingsolver herself maintains a home in Appalachia, some of that Appalachian dialect also seems to seep through into the voices of the younger girls. Rachel's dialect is a combination of "Oh Jeez" and Southernisms. She continues to speak this way at the end of the work. Leah is no longer a teenager and she moves towards the sophisticated language of political discourse. Anatole speaks like an Achebe character with the rhythms of African speech. Kingsolver seems to have been very conscious of the use of this literary device to reflect postcoloniality. Unlike Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, she seems to have worked very hard at reflecting identity through the dialect and style. Conrad, on the other hand, was probably working at making his third language, English, be a stylistic work of art. In an interview given to *Art and Soul Archives*, Kingsolver said,

I read, and re-read daily, from the King James Bible. It gave me the rhythm of the Price family's speech, the frame of reference for their beliefs, and countless plot ideas. Likewise, I began nearly every writing day by perusing a huge old two-volume Kikongo-French dictionary, compiled early in the century (by a missionary, of course). Slowly I began to grasp the music and subtlety of this amazing African language, with its infinite capacity of being misunderstood and translated.

One of the novel's challenges was the matter of capturing the language of teenage females from the Southeastern U.S. in the late 1950's. Since I was barely alive then, this was also foreign territory. Teenage speech is stereotyped and notoriously ephemeral; if I'd just guessed, it would have sounded inauthentic. This stumped me, until I hit pay dirt in a used bookstore in Boston: 35 pounds. I had *Life*, *Look*, and *Saturday Evening Post* magazines from 1958-1961 sent to me. I spent hundreds of hours immersed in the news, attitudes and advertisements of these years. Slowly the voices of my novel began to emerge

and Rachel Price -like Athena- was born fully formed, with every hair in place. "Aren't you glad you use Dial? Don't you wish everybody did?". (online)

So we see that Barbara Kingsolver's novel, a *bildungsroman* can actually be considered postcolonial because of the awareness of her heroine, the treatment of a kind of self-reflective almost yogic journey along a river which causes an awareness of belonging to the place of postcoloniality and because of the style in which the story is told. Thus it is that Barbara Kingsolver fulfills all the characteristics necessary for the literary paradigm of the postcolonial novel. There is no nostalgia in her work for the exotic. She is fully aware of the wrongs of postcolonial neo-colonialism, the unjust arrests, the unequal distribution of power and money, the rich and corrupt politicians buying themselves palaces with gold leafed chandeliers while the people boil food in old hub-caps. There is among the people, a nostalgia for colonial rule, which she captures and which is voiced even in today's newspapers. She depicts this just as Rushdie reflects it in *Midnight's Children* or Rohinton Mistry reflects it in *A Fine Balance*. Barbara Kingsolver's novel then takes its place alongside these great works of postcolonial literature. But if the writer's pen could solve problems, there would be far less injustice globally. As the *Christian Science Monitor* noted so aptly at the end of the interview with Barbara Kingsolver, Mobutu's regime was over, but "The new President Laurent Kabila has clashed with Tutsi rebels, and the Congo is once again in the throes of bloody strife" (online). That was almost five years ago. There have been subsequent regime changes. The *Kinshasa Daily* for today, Wednesday June 18, 2003 notes that the war rages in Bunia; Germans are asked to send troops as also are the Bangladeshis asked to send more U.N. peacekeeping troops. With an almost hint of nostalgia for colonialism, the editorial states, "So Congo [The Democratic Republic of Congo], which is larger than Western Europe with huge mineral resources continues to bleed. The Europeans who have had a long association with the Congo have a responsibility to act decisively on the side of peace" (online). The way in which Barbara Kingsolver has acted on the side of peace, by drawing attention to the mistreatment of the people by imperialists is probably to be preferred to inviting in more foreign soldiers. And yet as a person from a third world country, I also understand the newspaper's request. Barbara Kingsolver would prefer to see the people allowed to arrive at self-determination. This is what marks her intent, attitude, and work postcolonial. But are we ready and/or capable?

Notes

1. I have discussed the Bildungsroman as the seminal genre for postcolonial literature in Jussawalla (1990, 1997, 1998).

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