

**Inner Landscapes: An examination of mind style and ambivalence in  
*The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver**

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**ABSTRACT**

Set against the back drop of the Belgian Congo made famous by *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* depicts the trial and tribulation of a missionary's family and the inner lives of its five women protagonists who travel to Belgian Congo in the wake of the family patriarch, Mr. Price. By presenting the story through the narrative voices of Orleana Price, the wife of the missionary and her four daughters, Kingsolver explores issues of "double colonisation" of women through colonial and post-colonial times. Western women traveling to Africa during colonization find themselves in a problematic position insofar as they consider themselves superior to the natives or colonized and yet are disempowered within Western patriarchy. In order to cope with the contradictory position in which they find themselves they employ different strategies for survival. The intersection of colonial and feminist discourses in the novel creates ambivalence which is the subject of this paper.

Through my analysis of mind style, I hope to reveal the ambivalence in *The Poisonwood Bible*. I examine the language of the 5 narrators because each one of them has a unique and distinctive voice, thereby creating inner landscapes for each which are as divergent as they are varied. Through this analysis I would like to argue that a woman's position in the colonial and post-colonial world can only be ambivalent and since *The Poisonwood Bible* depicts this uncertainty, Barbara Kingsolver succeeds as a novelist.

*Keywords: Double- colonization, imperialism colonialism, post-colonialism, mind style, tropes, palindromes.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Mind style is defined as "any distinctive linguistic representation of an individual mental self" by Roger Fowler(1977, p. 103) and has been the subject of stylisticians when analyzing novels. Mind style can refer to the author's point of view or world view; the way he presents his apprehension of the world. At a philosophical level, it has to do with his conceptualization of the world of the novel. But at the linguistics level, it is textual patterning that is manifested through the words of the novel, or rather, as Fowler states, "cumulatively, consistent structural options, agreeing in cutting the presented world to one pattern or another which give rise to an impression of a world-view" (p. 76).

It is possible to study the mind style of authors, narrators and characters and several studies have exemplified its usefulness in gaining a greater insight into the art of writing and depicting

characters (Fludernik,1996; Halliday,1971; Semino,2007; Palmer, 2004; Margolin, 2003; Leech and Short,1981). Leech and Short (1981) explicate that Benjy's limited cognitive abilities are reflected in the use of language. The mind style of this character is captured through the use of simplistic lexis and syntax and the oddities in terms of the pronouns that he uses. Halliday (1971) examines transitivity in *The Inheritors* which William Golding develops to represent the mind style of the Neanderthal people who inhabit the world of the novel. Fludernik (1996) expands the notion of mind style to include consciousness and declares that she believes that this is central to twentieth century fiction. For Palmer, (2004) the notion of "mind" includes "all aspects of our inner life," namely not just prototypically cognitive activities such as thinking and perceiving, but also "dispositions, feelings, beliefs and emotions" (2004, p.19). Margolin's notion of "cognitive style" is defined as "a tendency to process information in a particular way which constitutes an interface between cognition and personality" (2003, p.277) and can be taken to stand for mind style.

For the purposes of this presentation, I propose to use mind style to represent the inner consciousness or inner voice of characters in the novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver. Since the novel is narrated by five characters, Orleanna Price and her four daughter: Rachel, Leah, Adah and Ruth May, their mind style, in fact, serves a quadruple purpose of presenting their inner consciousness, their point of view of other characters in the novel, their impression of the surroundings in which they live and finally, helps in moving the narration forward. In order to examine their mind style, I chose to ignore the outer landscape and the story of the novel and therefore, the final purpose as enlisted above, but rather, focus on the inner landscape which is impacted by the outer landscape as well as the characters' point of view of their father.

The hermeneutic turn that I propose to take proceeds through three stages: an analysis of the distinctive language used by different character narrators, the figurative elements used by the character narrators and finally the focalization of the character narrators. The analysis is grounded in Postcolonial theory, which I will argue, makes this analysis both insightful and meaningful.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW OF *THE POISONWOOD BIBLE*

Described a "revisionist historical novel"(Austenfield 2006) , *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara extends the novel form to include several layers of philosophical thought. At one level it is neo-domestic fiction, but at another level it is a socio-cultural critique of the policies of United states insofar as the Belgian Congo is concerned. The crisscrossing of various elements of colonialism and post colonialism, patriarchy and feminist thought, Baptist and Presbyterianism, creates a rich tapestry which has been alluded to by many critics. The unique narrative style has been commented upon drawing attention to the five narrators by Austenfield (2006) who describes it a "revelatory narrative circle of five character-narrators" and claims that it is their focalization that creates the world of the novel and it is the distinctive voice of each one of the characters that contributes to the richness of the story.

Many critics (Austenfield, 2006; Byfield and Byfield,1999; Hellinger,2007) have commented upon the themes of *The Poisonwood Bible* stating that it has been written in answer to Joseph

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which is a searing tale of colonization in Congo and the dehumanization of not just the native, but also the white man which takes place in the darkest, deepest part of Africa. While Conrad's novel delineates the white man's descent into hell, Kingsolver's novel explores the effect of the environment on five women who come from the bastion of modernity, civilization and culture: United States of America. Describing Nathan Price as the "evil missionary", Byfield and Byfield(1999) deplore the anomalies in the novel. According to them he is the archetypal evil missionary who proselytizes without understanding the culture and the people he is trying to convert. Consequently he becomes a figure of malice rather than a man of God. For Hellinger (2007) the novel is a representation of Kingsolver's ability to integrate her moral, political and theological views into *The Poisonwood Bible*, and how they are culturally, religiously, and morally relevant. According to Riswold (2003) the themes of justification, vocation, Christian Community and Biblical authority suffuse this novel. The book is divided into 63 chapters, each with Biblical names. Nathan Price is a Baptist missionary who travels to the Congo to bring the word of the Christian God to the Congolese and he represents the worst kind of kind of proselytizer who causes more harm to the religion than benefit, in spiritual terms. There are several Biblical references as well as a wealth of religious symbols in the novel. Nathan is a product of his historical context and upbringing as a child of patriarchal imperialism. But his insensitivity and inflexibility is his own and it is this which leads to his downfall. Gorton (2009) calls him the "absent centre" of the novel. For Fox (2004), Nathan Price is the dominant discourse which constructs otherness in such a way that it always contains a trace of ambivalence about its own authority. Purcell (2009) describes Nathan Price as a "stinging metaphor for an equally inept and arrogant American policy which is engendered through patronizing self-righteous zeal and xenophobia"(p, 94).

Let us now look at colonialism post colonialism and feminist theory in order to throw light on the major issues that criss-cross the novel's world.

## **COLONIALISM POST COLONIALISM AND FEMINIST THEORY**

Colonial discourse is essentially a pre-figuration of colonial authority over the oppressed native. Colonialism meant subjugation of the local, indigenous population, exploitation of the land and resources for profit and finally, settlement of territory. Confronted with a morass of images which they could not comprehend, the colonial power proceeded to create order out of chaos. Two important tropes are associated with colonialism: masculinity and geography. Noyes (1992:182) points out that "colonial discourse must construct a boundless, featureless, homogenous space which may serve as a stage upon which colonial desire may produce its fantasies." Therefore geography and masculinity are closely interlinked and represented in many writings of the colonial period. The feminization of the colonial landscape has been emphasized by Blunt and Rose (1994: 10) who state that "the desire for colonial control was often expressed in terms of sexual control." Colonial literature celebrates the myth of male achievement. The tropes of subjugation, quelling, conquering and controlling are embodied in Nathan Price's determination to grow plants in his back yard. That it leads to immense labor without bearing any fruit is the post colonial deconstruction of the colonial imperative; a constant slippage which throws back in his face, his helplessness and indeterminacy.

It has been pointed out by feminist critics (Belsey and Moore, 1989; Boehmer, 1995; Mohanty, 1991) that Post colonial literature written by women attempts to subvert colonial consciousness. In deploying the voices of five female narrators, Kingsolver undercuts Nathan Price's authority firstly, as a father, secondly, as religious head and thirdly, as a colonizer. In other words, feminist consciousness in the novel develops along three trajectories. How each female character in the novel is able to break loose from the debilitating clutches of the patriarchal figure is delineated in the novel.

## Framework of Analysis

The narration of *The Poisonwood Bible* is unique and different in that there are five narrators: Orleanna Price and her four daughters: Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth Mary. The father, Nathan Price is never given a voice. He falls into the category of the "disnarrated" (Kartunen, p. 2008) which is described as the "social norm that a person has failed to live up to, or the Bakhtinian other voice that the text responds to". Nathan Price represents the social, colonial and religious norm in the novel. By making him disnarrated, Kingsolver proclaims her independence of the norms ascribed to women in a colonial set up. Through the voices of the wife and four daughters Kingsolver provides richly dialectical, polyvocal and multivalent view-points which constantly question the norms that are set up by the disnarrated. What is interesting is that these polyphonic voices present 5 views points as well as reflect the inner landscape of the 5 characters ranging from forthright honesty, through adoration to downright dismissal of the values upheld by Nathan Price. The multivalent view points create an ambivalence in the novel which add to its richness and complexity.

The ambivalence in the mind style can be explored through stylistic analysis. The novel is divided into 7 books that correspond to titles in the Bible with a total of 63 chapters. Each of these chapters is narrated by the women of the Price family. While each book starts with Orleanna Price's narration, all other chapters are narrated by her daughters. Orleanna's narration is retrospective, whereas her daughters' narrations are contemporaneous creating a dislocation in time. For the purposes of this article I focus on the beginning sections of the first chapter of each character. An attempt is made to ensure that these sections are of almost equal length. Wherever it is necessary, I also include tropes that get foregrounded in the rest of the novel as well.

## ORLEANNA PRICE

Orleanna Price is the wife of Nathan Price. The novel starts with Orleanna's description of the forest. She addresses the reader directly:

1. *"Picture a forest. I want you to be its conscience, the eyes in the trees."*  
The viewpoint shifts to the forest itself which has the following:
2. *The trees are columns of stick, brindled bark like muscular animals once grown beyond All reason.*
3. *Every space is filled with life: delicate, poisonous frogs were painted like skeletons, clutched in copulation secreting their precious eggs into dripping leaves.*
4. *Vines strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight.*
5. *The breathing of monkeys*

6. *A glide of snake belly on branch*
7. *A single file army of ants biting a mammoth tree into uniform grains and hauling it down to the dark for their ravenous queen.*
8. *And, in reply, a choir of seedlings arching their neck out of rolled the stumps, sucking life out of death.*

The construction of the sentences follows a parallel structure.

*The trees are columns of .....*

*Every space is filled with life .....*and there is a profusion of similes and metaphors:

“brindled bark like muscular animals”, “delicate poisonous s frogs war painted like **skeletons**”  
 “vines **strangling** their own”, “everlasting **wrestle** for sunlight”, “single file **army**.”

It can be seen that all the tropes in the first paragraphs are associated with violence, death and destruction: *poisonous, war-painted, skeleton, strangling, wrestle, army, ravenous, rotted, death.*

The second paragraph is a description of a woman walking through the forest with her four girls. It is still unclear who the narrator is because s/he continues to address the reader directly:

9. *“Be careful, later on you have to decide what sympathy they deserve.*

Then there is a description of the mother and her four daughters:

10. *The mother, specifically, watch how she leads them on.*
11. *Four girls compressed in bodies as tight as bowstrings*
12. *They resist affinity like cats in a bag*
13. *Two blonds- the one short and fierce, the other tall and imperious flanked by matched brunettes like bookends.*

And many more. While the similes attributable to the human beings have positive connotations, all metaphors that are attributable to the forest or creatures in the forest have negative connotations form collocational sets of death, decay and violence :

14. *Spiders return to their **killing** ways*
15. *Ants **boil darkly** over the crumbs*

The mother sits at the edge of the pool alone when, suddenly, she is confronted with the presence of another at the pool. He is described in great detail: “*a beautiful animal,*” “*black tipped ears*”, “*back is purplish brown*”, “*gentle hump of his shoulders,*” “*while stripped flanks*”, “*stiff four legs splayed out to the sides like stilts*”, “*small velvet horns*”. The creature is not named and the point of view shifts. The narrator switches to 1<sup>st</sup> person:

16. *“It was brief, I can promise that much. I was that woman”* and the creature is named:
17. *“The okapi came to the stream.”*

Orleanna describes what she has read about the okapi and how the Europeans thought of it as a unicorn. The final description is that of a white man whose act was:

18. *“Raising up the cross haired rifle sight, taking it for his own”.*

It is interesting to note that Orleanna after using numerous lexical items, similes and metaphors associated with death, destruction and violence when it comes to describing the forest, desists from describing the most violent act in this section, which is, the killing of a wild animal. The fearful and violent representation of the forest contrasted with the under lexicalization of a killing of God's creature clearly creates an ambivalence which is worked out at many levels in the different sections of the novel. This animal will be stuffed and displayed in the New York museum of National history.

Orleanna continues to address the second person:

19. *“I know better and so do you.”*

But here, the 'you' refers to the Okapi. This realization dawns as we continue to read further. Her use of images/words of violence clearly indicate Orleanna's mixed feelings about the African forest. Clearly, she is fascinated by its beauty, but the use of tropes of death, destruction and violence underlie whatever feeling the forest/Africa evokes in her. Her reluctance to name the thoughtless brutality of killing the beast is foregrounded against the section that goes before it and is therefore made significant.

Any act of linguistic enunciation is an act of ideologically stated representation. In the first chapter, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person apostrophically evoked three times: the first time it refers to the reader directly; the second time it refers to the Okapi and third time, the "you" refers to Orleanna Price herself. Thus there is a movement from the eternal world of the reader to the internal world of the forest in the novel and finally to the inner workings of Orleanna's mind.

Orleanna's ambivalent attitude towards her husband is evident from the tropes she uses to describe her relationship with her husband:

20. *By the time Ruth May was born....Nathan was in full possession of the country once known as Orleanna Wharton.*

21. *In the end my lot was cast with Congo...barefoot bride of men who took her jewels and promised her the kingdom.*

Note how she articulates herself as a country and how the country, becomes a woman. This identification of land with women is deconstruction of colonialism on the one hand and patriarchy on the other. In the post colonial feminist world, a woman's awareness of her subjugation and her identification with the land gives her strength to break away from a meaningless relationship with her husband.

## **LEAH PRICE**

The second chapter of the novel is the narration of Leah Price who has been described by critics as an "intelligent, flexible learner" (Austenfield: 2006). Leah's voice is distinctive from her mother in that her language is devoid of the use figurative elements in the first chapter of the

novel. However, it must be noted that she is the internal focalizer who focalizes all the other characters in the novel, particularly her father. In the first section of the novel she focalizes her father, mother and her sisters. She senses the stranglehold that her father has over her mother, yet she does not support her. In her limited understanding, this is a fact that has to be accepted: that men rule and women obey. It is significant that Leah is closest to her dad and tries to emulate him in everything he does. But, as the novel progresses, the density of tropes in the chapters narrated by Leah rises exponentially as she progressively recedes from the sphere of her father's influence. This is evident from a corpus analysis of Leah's narration. The further she moves from the circle of patriarchy, the closer she is drawn to the forces of post colonialism. She joins the warriors of the tribe to kill wild animals. Her acceptance of the African way of life provides an alternative to the disnarrated in the novel. If Nathan Price can be called the absent centre of the novel, then Leah Price is the moral centre. The maximum number of chapters are attributed to her (25). Her acceptance of the African way of life is signalled not just by her love for Anatole, but also by the fact that she is able to carry a plastic demijohn on her head like any other African woman. In doing so she joins the sisterhood of her African sisters. She expresses her ambivalent feelings towards her father thus:

22. *How could I follow my mother out of here now and run away after what we had done? But after what we had done, how could I stay?*

### **ADAH PRICE**

Adah Price is the cripple twin of Leah's. That she is highly intelligent, but dumb is expressed through the focalization of other characters like her mother and sisters. But, despite her handicap, Kingsolver gives her a highly developed and articulate voice. She is very creative and this is displayed in several ways in the novel:

A. **Her use of palindromes:** Adah has the ability to spout palindromes. They fascinate her. She calls herself *Ecirp Nelle hada . Live was I ere I saw evil*. There are several examples in the novel.

B. **Figurative language:** In her first chapter, the tropes that she uses are those of colours and shapes in many different ways. Some the examples are:

23. *Congo pink.*

24. *A wide red-plank of dirt*

25. *A skinny black line*

26. *A lone red snake of dirt road*

27. *The pink sunrise surprise of herd*

28. *red dirt under bare fool sun is a pink, round dollar*

29. *rising example of green hills*

30. *pole lazy blue*

31. *Scarlet bougainvillea.*

It is almost as if the landscape is a riot of colours which only she can access because of her special abilities.

C. The tropes that she uses are sensual or visual

32. *A lone red snake of dirt road*

33. *Hodge podge string of unmatched beads*

34. *Village is cleared hairless as a brick.*

35. *These are like ballet dancers*

36. *A rising rumple of dark green hills fold on each other like a great old table cloth*

37. *A frenzy of hard dirt ruts that look like ocean waves frozen solid in the middle of a tempest.*

**D. Her attitude towards her father:** The first reference to the father is “Our Father” echoing the Christian prayer “Our father who art in heaven.....” It is only as we read on that the use of the expression “our father” is ironic. She is the most sardonic of the sisters. A corpus analysis of the use of “our father” by the sisters reveals that it is only Adah who uses this phrase.

**E. Reference to literary characters :** Later on in the novel, Adah has the maximum references to literature and literary characters, such as referring to herself as Jekyll and Hyde, spouting poetry by Emily Dickenson, William Carlos Williams. For a character in the novel who cannot speak for most part of it, she is intelligent, well read, articulate and comprehensive in her writing. She is one character who is neither impressed by her father’s religion, patriarchy nor his authoritarian demeanor. When she can speak, she says she despises him.

**F. Her attitude towards her twin sister:** Ambivalence in Adah is seen in her relationship with her twin sister, Leah. She says she was “cannibalized” by her twin in the womb, because of which she was born handicapped. It is significant that she uses the word, “cannibalized”. When her mother rescues her baby sister, Ruth May, she attributes it to her malformed body and she believes that her mother has chosen the child who is complete rather than the handicapped one and she feels abandoned. It is only later in the novel, that it is realized that her condition can be corrected and, as she becomes normal, she loses her ability to form palindromes.

## **RACHEL PRICE**

The oldest of the Price sisters is noted for her indifference to her surroundings and carelessness towards everything around her. Her racism highlights the power relations between the west and Africa. An examination of the mind style reveals several interesting features.

Some of them are:

**A. Over use of the American vernacular:** *Man oh man, boy, what, upchucked.*

A corpus analysis of the word “like” indicates that for Rachel, “like “ is not used just for comparisons as the others do, but more so, as an Americanism. None of the other sisters exhibit this kind of trait.

**B. Neologisms** : there are several in the first chapter of her narrative:

37. *Ruth-May fixing to executrate her second swoon of the day*

a neologism forming by combining *execute* and *orchestrate* suggesting that Ruth May’s swoon in fact, was not real but a pretence.

38. *heathen pandemony*. Pandemony instead of *pandemonium*

39. *Fixing to give up the goat* instead of *ghost*

40. *Many heart smoke like a drum look for granite* instead of *granted*.

**C. Figurative language:** unlike the other characters in the novel, all tropes that are attributable to Rachel are, in fact, clichés:

41. *Dirt everywhere like red chalk dust*

42. *Threw my eyes around in panic like Black Beauty trapped in flames*

43. *Brand new tulip tailored linen*

44. *Only smoke hung above us like net*

45. *Women were singing light quivery lines like birds gone crazy.*

46. *Heavy breasts swinging down like balloons full of water*

47. *Pastel shapes of many strives like party balloons but in the wrong party.*

48. *Like birds in wilderness.*

**D. Dehumanizing of black people:** Use of expressions, such as,

49. *The hand that I held was not my mother’s but a thick brown **claw** a stranger.*

The use of the word “claw” dehumanizing the black person whose hand she is holding.

What is foregrounded in the novel is that even though the novel covers a period of nearly 50 years and Rachel turns from a teenager to a old woman, her language remains the same. A corpus analysis of the frequency distribution of the tropes in her narration reveals a pattern. They are equally distributed throughout the novel.

## **RUTH MAY PRICE**

The first chapter of Ruth May’s narration is the shortest amongst the 5, consisting of only 711 words. The language is divested of any tropes: there are neither similes nor metaphors. Since the narration is supposed to be of a five year old, Ruth May refers to comic book characters like Donald Duck and stories from the Bible to evoke the consciousness of a five year old child. She

dies midway through the novel but her narrative voice ends the novel. The last chapter is hers and here, she is a spirit which, like the green mamba snake, glides on the branch of a tree. She brilliantly evokes the beginning of the novel which echoes the introductory passage which I have discussed great length. She focalizes her mother....*Mother, you can still live on... I forgive you....* Also, it is interesting to note that Ruth May almost never focalizes her father or the landscape.

## FOCALIZATION

Drawing from Genette(1981), Bal(1983) and Rimmon-Kenan(1983), the novel has five narrators who are homodiegetic narrators and internal focalizers. Genette asks a crucial question “who sees?” and “who speaks?” to distinguish between narration and focalization. In *The Poisonwood Bible* the one who sees is also the one who speaks, but since there are 5 narrators, the shift in narration and focalization does not happen as it does in a heterodiegetic narrative. The narrators are homodiegetic, therefore the focalization always remains internal and mono-focal if I may coin an expression, as long as it is within a chapter. If there is a shift in focalization, this also means a shift in narration contributing to polyphony in the novel. Orleanna Price uses the apostrophizing “you” three times in the first chapter. The daughters focalize their parents and each other and thus help to move the story forward. The novel ends with Ruth May’s narration where she is a spirit. She uses the apostrophic “you”, but this refers to the mother.

## CONCLUSION

We can see that ambivalence is expressed through the use of tropes by the five character narrators in the novel. Orleanna Price is clearly ambivalent vis a vis the African forest and her position as Nathan Price’s wife. Leah Price is ambivalent of herself as Nathan Price’s daughter. Adah Price is ambivalent of her relationship with her mother and twin sister. With Rachel and Ruth May, the former is insensitive, self-centred and crass, the latter is a young girl whose consciousness has not yet formed. By depicting five women’s inner landscape, Kingsolver seems to suggest that multiple responses to patriarchy, religion and colonization remain ambivalent in the final count because the alternative is not possible.

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