

A Self-discovery Voyage: Taylor's Search for Self-Identity in *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver

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Abstract

Western literature has conventionally been concerned with male characters and their lonely journeys, however, Barbara Kingsolver has escaped the constraints of the genre. Hence, the aim of this paper is to analyze the main character's self-identity search in *The Bean Trees*. In order to accomplish this, first, some background information about Barbara Kingsolver is introduced as well as a general explanation about the ecofeminist theory and its influence in the author. The paper deals with the building process of Taylor's identity regarding four principal themes: gender, community, ethnicity, and nature. In each section, secondary sources and close reading are combined in order to analyze the role of the main characters of this novel. Lastly, the conclusion rounds up how the previously mentioned themes have influenced Taylor's self-identity and addresses her development throughout her journey.

Key words: self-identity, ecofeminism, *The Bean Trees*, Barbara Kingsolver

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1. Introduction

The West has always attracted lone wolves, and throughout the years it has evolved into an idealised place. In the 19th century, it was no longer a deserted place, for many people going West represented a chance for reinventing themselves. As a result of that, the Myth of the West became one of the pillars of American culture, with mobility and independence as fundamental features. Nonetheless, the origin of the myth can be traced back to the colonial period, when notorious personalities, such as John Smith or William Bradford, promoted the idea of moving to the West. In their writings they describe the New World as a “paradise on Earth”, the land of freedom and opportunities. As far as Western writers are concerned, we cannot avoid mentioning James Fenimore Cooper and his novel *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) which will mark a generation of readers through the romanticization of the barbaric West. Art, as well as journalism, will also be essential to expand the Western culture, as illustrated, for example, by George Catlin’s portraits of Native Americans in the West. Regarding journalism, Horace Greeley and his famous phrase “Go West, Young Man, Go West” will attract thousands of lost souls into the enigmatic mystery of the West.

The previously mentioned facts will play a crucial role in the creation of the West as a fable. Still, Frederick Jackson Turner will be the first man wording the Myth of the West into an essay. In 1893 he published his seminal essay *The Frontier in American History*. In his “frontier thesis”, he defended that the frontier is “the meeting point between savagery and civilization [...] the most important thing about the American frontier is, that it lies at the hither edge of free land” (Turner 2). Both ideas, the West and the frontier, are tightly connected as they nourish free land and individualism.

Traditionally, the myth of the West has neglected the role of minorities and women in Western American culture. In fact, women often had no voice, moreover, they were encouraged to meet unfeasible beauty conventions. The *Gibson Girl* was the model to follow, that is to say, “an upper-class white woman with a corseted hour-glass figure, upswept hair, and a pure ivory complexion” (Davidson v). This unrealistic prototype of the perfect woman influenced middle-class women but also writers. For instance, Kate Chopin driven by the irrationalism of the *Gibson Girl*, tried to depict a woman contrary to the ladylike trend. In her short story “Regret”, she describes the protagonist in the following way, “Mamzelle Aurélie possessed a good strong figure, ruddy cheeks, hair

that was changing from brown to gray, and a determined eye. She wore a man's hat about the farm, and an old blue army over-coat when it was cold, and sometimes top-boots" (145).

Culturally and physically oppressed, women needed to find their own voice in the patriarchal society of the West, thus, for many of them writing became an escape mechanism. In that scenario, we find, for example, Mary Austin, she was one of the few women writers in the West in the early 20th century. In her autobiography, *Earth Horizon*, she tries to give testimony on behalf of those women who suffered violent abuse from their husbands. Connected to that, Melody Graulich claims that "Austin is right when she suggests that though women may sometimes manage to intervene in individual acts of violence, [...] they will never stop woman abuse until they (women) begin to speak about it and to analyze its causes" (111). Within this context, strong female authors stood out, for instance, Susan Fenimore Cooper or Willa Cather who won the *Pulitzer Prize* for *One of Ours* in 1923; Grace Raymond Hebard is also well known as a historian who helped to shape Wyoming's legacy. Furthermore, Zitála-Ša, also known as Red Bird, was a Sioux writer and activist who exposed the distress that Native American women underwent in Western Euro-American culture.

In that oppressive environment, it came as a surprise the fact that "western states more quickly approved woman suffrage than eastern states" (Stefanco 265). In fact, after a revolutionary suffrage movement, in 1893 women from Colorado won the right to vote (Stefanco 273). Encouraged by the pioneering endeavour of their predecessors, the women's movement broke out in 1960s. In particular, we need to make allusion to prominent writers who gave a voice to the aforementioned liberation movement, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis or Jo Freeman are some of them. It took many decades and exceptional women to pave the way for the future female writers to come; because of their influence nowadays we can enjoy reading stories from writers, such as Leslie Marmon Silko and Barbara Kingsolver.

Here we find our subject under study, Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Bean Trees*, which was published in 1988. The novel revolves around the character of Taylor Greer, a young Kentuckian who leaves her home in order to avoid a miserable life in rural Kentucky and to find a better life in the West. Throughout her journey, Taylor will find many turning points that will change her perspective of the US society and life itself.

The Bean Trees may be regarded as a coming of age narrative, meaning that it is a “novel that deals with the maturation process, with how and why the protagonist develops as s/he does, both morally and psychologically” (*Encyclopædia Britannica*). It is important to highlight that we face a non-traditional Bildungsroman, as explained by Begoña Quintano:

This traditional genre has been appropriated and redefined by them (women) to present a fictional heroine, exposing the different and various conflicts women face as they gain maturity; their awakening to certain limitations, and the choices that they make when they deal with aspects of adulthood such as their role in society. (104)

Likewise, the readers of the novel will witness the evolution of Taylor, as she will be forced to mature and confront the crude reality of being a woman in a male world. Kingsolver gives a voice to all the Taylors that away from home find their place in the world. As Himmelwright states “merging these characteristics: the desire for movement and the desire to tend a home, Kingsolver is able to express a female voice that has heretofore been lost or subsumed by the white male experience” (28).

Bearing the previous details in mind, the aim of this essay is to discuss Taylor’s search for self-identity in *The Bean Trees* through the framework of cultural studies with a particular emphasis on ecofeminism. Special attention will be also paid to ethnicity and gender as fundamental critical categories to approach this novel. To do so, first I will explain the life of the author Barbara Kingsolver. In the following section, I will briefly introduce the eco-feminist theory and Kingsolver’s connection to it. Finally, I will analyze the building process of the protagonist’s identity focusing on gender, community, ethnicity and nature.

2. Author: Barbara Kingsolver

“In a world as wrong as this one, all we can do is make things as right as we can,” (Kingsolver 220). These few words capture the essence of Barbara Kingsolver’s lifestyle as well as her literary work’s message. To have a better understanding of Kingsolver’s pursuit in life, we must start analysing her life from the beginning. Barbara Kingsolver was born in Annapolis, Maryland, on April 8, 1955. She can hardly remember anything of her birth town as she was two years old when her family moved to east-central Kentucky. Since a very young age she started writing, plots and stories, later on, she would change to journals and essays. As the author explains on her web

page in the section “Barbara Kingsolver Revealed: an autobiography”¹, “I used to beg my mother to let me tell her a bedtime story.” After leaving Kentucky in 1973, she entered DePauw University in Indiana where she majored in biology. That career decision definitely had a big influence on her literary style; later on, she will frequently use biology, ecology and natural sciences, as main themes of her novels, for instance, *Prodigal Summer* (2000), Kingsolver herself describes it as a “biological novel”. In 1958, after finishing her dissertation in the University of Arizona’s Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, she married Joe Hoffman. In the next years, they would move to Tucson’s desert and live a socially conscious life; they both worked investigating human-rights violations and supported Latin American illegal immigrants seeking asylum. In many of her novels, we can distinguish direct references to the experiences she lived in the desert. As Maya Jaggi explains in an article about Barbara Kingsolver written for *The Guardian*:

Her early fiction was based in the American South and south-west. *The Bean Trees* (1988), [...], was narrated by a Southern woman who adopts an abused and abandoned Cherokee girl and settles in Arizona. In *Animal Dreams* (1990), a woman moves to Nicaragua during the US-backed contra war against the Sandinistas. *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), [...], centers on a custody battle, as a Native American lawyer tries to wrest the adopted girl back to the Cherokee nation.

In the mid-eighties, Kingsolver started publishing poems and short fiction, but it was not until 1989 that she published her first novel, *The Bean Trees*. The writing process of this novel was quite unconventional, she wrote it during the insomniac nights of her first pregnancy. Before the publication of her first novel, Kingsolver was not aware of its potential, as she claims on her website “In March ’87, I had a fit of extreme housecleaning and needed to evict the piles of pages (the novel) one way or other: the trash can, or New York”. Fortunately, she did not get rid of those pile pages, if she had done it, *The Bean Trees* would not have become a standard in literature classes. The following year she would publish her second novel, *Animal Dreams* (1990).

In 1991, another life-changing event happened in Kingsolver’s life, she moved to the Canary Islands together with her husband and daughter. During her time there, because of the proximity between the Canaries and the African coast, she started researching for a novel set in Africa which she would call *The Poisonwood Bible*. In

¹ All the biographical references used in this section are taken from “Barbara Kingsolver Revealed: an Autobiography”

1993, she wrote the sequel to *The Bean Trees, Pigs in Heaven*. This publication brought prestige to her literary career as she entered *The New York Times* bestseller list. The subsequent years were very productive for Kingsolver as she published various novels, the most remarkable ones being, *High Tide in Tucson* (1995), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), a postcolonial political epic set in Africa for which she was a finalist for the *Pulitzer Prize* of 1999, and *The Lacuna* (2009). What is more, we cannot go without mentioning *Flight Behavior*, published in 2012 and *Unsheltered*, her most recent novel which will be published in 2018. It is essential to acknowledge that most of her literary works deal with concerns about motherhood. According to Jaggi, “the broad appeal of her story of a mother and daughters may owe something to its faint echoes of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (loved by Kingsolver as a child) or *The Joy Luck Club*.”

Aside from all her literary production, Kingsolver has contributed to U.S. essential newspapers and she is a frequent columnist for popular newspapers, such as *The Guardian*. In the latter newspaper, she has written articles about U.S. politics' crisis, such as “A view from the south: let the Confederate flag go” or “#MeToo isn't enough. Now women need to get ugly.”

Currently, Barbara Kingsolver lives in southern Appalachia with her family, where they raise Icelandic sheep.

3. Ecofeminist Theory

The idea of ecofeminism or ecological feminism is quite a recent term coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It analyses the interaction between women and nature. In order to understand better Kingsolver's relationship with this theory in her literary works, it is crucial to have a clear idea of ecofeminism's origin.

Ecology and ecofeminism have many points in common, they both are non-violent and have been taken to extremes (Meillon 130). Basically, ecology is a movement with the purpose of protecting the environment from the harm of the civilization; whereas, ecofeminism focuses on the relationship between women and nature for women to be able to emancipate themselves from the social strains of the patriarchy. That is, ecofeminism aims at destroying the hierarchal society throughout the contemplation of nature. A prestigious ecofeminist philosopher, Ynestra King, suggests:

Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy. There is no natural hierarchy; human hierarchy is projected on to nature and then used to justify social domination. Therefore, ecofeminist theory seeks to show the connections between all forms of domination, including the domination of non-human nature, and ecofeminist practice is necessarily anti-hierarchal. (King 19 cited in Meillon 130)

Going back in history, the connection between women and nature has always been there. For instance, the expression *mother earth* may date back to Greek mythology “characters like Gaia, Isis and the religious character Eve are basically nature-related characters. These women represent fertility, which is the first characteristic of nature” (Demir 21). However, throughout history that bond has had its ups and downs. For example, the Renaissance idealized the figure of women as beautiful and maternal, they were more connected to nature than men. Driven by such controversy the social hierarchy of that time believed that “like wild chaotic nature, women needed to be subdued and kept in their place” (Merchant 132).

In the white western culture, female and nature have been underrated by a patriarchal society. One example of that oppression can be the language used by men to refer to women:

Women are described in animal terms as pets, cows, sows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, old hens, pussycats, cats, cheetahs, birdbrains, and harebrain. Animalizing or naturalizing women in a (patriarchal) culture where animals are seen as inferior to humans (men) thereby reinforces and authorizes women’s inferior status. (Warren 12 cited in Demir 22)

Demir summarizes all the oppression experienced by women and nature in the following words, “mythology made connections of nature and women, then Christianity legalized their domination of nature, and lastly the Scientific Revolution, which resulted in the capitalist order, turned women into a species in Nature to be dominated” (21).

Furthermore, although ecofeminism took place as a political movement in the US in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, it did not appear in the literary world until the 1990s. Ecofeminism is an important part of eco-literature which focuses on the preponderance of women and nature (Mahato 638). Nowadays there is a wide range of female writers whose works are based on ecofeminist issues, for example, Margaret Atwood, Sue Monk Kidd, Barbara Kingsolver and Louise Erdrich. In an interview to Joseph Bruchac in 1987, Erdrich tried to explain how women are driven by nature:

we are taught to present a demure face to the world and yet there is a kind of wild energy behind it in many women that is transformational energy, and not only transforming to them but to other people [...] I have an urgent reason for thinking about women attuned to their power and honest nature, not the socialized nature that says ‘I can’t possibly do this’. (82)

In the case of Kingsolver, she started having a close relationship with nature and social issues since a very early age. Led by her father, her family moved to the Congo to provide medical services. Then in her university years, she decided to major in biology which provided her with infinite knowledge in plants and environment, in general, afterwards in her literary works many references to environmental issues will be noticeable. For instance, in *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver speaks about women and their relationship with the landscape of the Appalachian region. In addition to that, she condemns the effects of environmental pollution and its deadly effects on the characters of Rachel and Jewel (Mahato 635).

Kingsolver has also written about Native Americans and their bitter relationship with the federal government of the United States (Dickson 2). According to Noel Sturgeon, “Native American cultures appear so often in ecofeminist writings because they represent ecological cultures that in some instances can also make claims to relative equality between man and woman” (269). We can find a clear example of this statement in “Homeland”, a short story from the collection *Homeland and Other Stories*, here Kingsolver speaks about the degradation of the Cherokee nation in the 19th century. The Native American theme is also depicted in *The Bean Trees*, when at the beginning of her journey, Taylor narrates the tyranny suffered by her ancestors:

It was clear to me that the whole intention of bringing the Cherokees here (Oklahoma) was to get them to lie down and die without a fight. The Cherokees believed God was in trees. [...] From what I could see, there was not one tree in the entire state of Oklahoma. (13)

In general, throughout her work Kingsolver offers an environmental ethic of bioregionalism, this is, she suggests that when “humans begin to understand their place within an evolving biological context, their actions will move toward the sustenance of and care for their human and nonhuman communities” (Cusick 214).

4. The Building Process of Taylor’s Identity

Since the question of identity is the backbone of my paper, I find it indispensable to explain what connotations the term “identity” can bear from a cultural point of view.

Yet, it is hopeless to define such an ambiguous term in just one sentence. According to Stuart Hall, we need to distinguish three conceptions of identity. Firstly, “The Enlightenment subject was based on a conception of the human person as a fully centered individual [...] The essential center of the self was a person's identity.” Secondly, the sociological subject considered that in the modern world “the subject was not autonomous and self-sufficient, but was formed in relation to ‘significant others’” i.e. “identity is formed in the ‘interaction’ between self and society” (597). Finally, the post-modern subject has “no fixed, essential, or permanent identity [...] It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self’” (598).

Furthermore, in terms of “gender identity”, in *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir asserts that “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society” (330). Consequently, social and political forces shape women identity. Nevertheless, Beauvoir’s controversial theory has had several detractors, for instance, Luce Irigaray. She suggests that Beauvoir’s idea of women being the opposite of men is not accurate, because “women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity” (Butler 9)

Throughout her writing, Barbara Kingsolver calls into question our notion of identity, though not only gender identity, but she also digs into national, class, and ethnic identity.

In this section I will analyze the role of Taylor’s journey in the creation of her own identity, for this purpose, I will first approach the struggle that Taylor may find as a woman and how she faces it. Secondly, I will focus on Taylor’s extrovert personality and the way she breaks with the traditional “community” institutions in search of her own place in the Western society. Thirdly, I will explore the different ethnic backgrounds that Taylor **gets** in contact with and how they influence her. Last, I will examine the role of nature and I will explain how it is crucial explain how it is crucial to understand Taylor’s identity.

4.1. Against Gender Constraints

In *The Bean Trees* Taylor's journey starts in Kentucky and she goes through Oklahoma to Arizona, her final destination. The afore mentioned states are known for being rather conservative, and in that environment Taylor will find herself struggling to find her own gender identity.

It is necessary to remark that at the beginning of the story our protagonist's name is Marietta, the Italian diminutive of Maria, an extremely feminine name. Since she was three the protagonist was not content with her name, "Missy was what everyone called me, not that it was my name, [...] Miss Marietta and later on just Missy" (2). When the protagonist leaves her hometown, Pittman, she decides to definitely change her name in order to have a fresh start, "I would get myself a new name [...] this seemed like the time to make a clean break [...] just wanted a change" (11). She leaves the decision of her new name to the destiny, and when she runs out of fuel in Taylorville, she names herself Taylor Greer after that town. Giving herself a new name Taylor is creating a new identity; she is leaving her given name, the name that her mother chose for her in the past and rejecting her roots. We should also focus our attention in her new name, Taylor, an androgynous name that can fit anybody regardless of the person's gender. Therefore, we could argue that her new name can be a social statement as Taylor does not represent any gender. Similarly, Mercedes Albert-Llacer claims that, "Kingsolver chooses deliberately a sexually ambiguous name for the protagonist in order to show her rejection toward normative femininity, in particular, the cult of true womanhood" (49).

However, throughout the story Taylor will also undermine her name, "Taylor doesn't mean anything that interesting. A tailor hems up people's pants and stuff like that" (148). Although at the beginning she chose her name as an empowerment symbol, then she ends up rejecting it, through this action some of her personality traits may emerge, for example, narcissism or pride, as nothing is good enough for her.

Furthermore, the character of Mattie breaks gender stereotypes and serves as an inspiration for Taylor, "I had never seen a woman with this kind of know-how. It made me feel proud, somehow. In Pittman if a woman had tried to have her own tire store she would have been run out of business" (43-44). Mattie takes the role of a mentor in Taylor's life as well as in her coming of age process, she gives her a job in her garage. In this scenario, Taylor starts working in a traditionally male environment while she breaks gender constraints.

Taylor rejects the archetype of the Southern womanhood (Albert-Llacer 49). She embarks on her journey in order to escape from a mundane lifestyle: “In Pittman County there was nothing in pants that was worth the trouble” (112). Were she to stay in Kentucky, she would become a teen mom, “Pittman was twenty years behind the nation in practically every way you can think of, except the rate of teenage pregnancies” (47). In addition to that, Taylor characterizes herself as an independent woman that does not need any male figure around, and Lou Ann tends to criticize Taylor’s attitude, “I’ll swan, Taylor, you talk about men like they’re a hang-nail. To hear you tell it, you’d think man was only put on this earth to keep urinals from going to waste” (111-12).

4.2. *Redefining Community*

How can I be part of a community? That is one of the questions that Taylor faces in this novel. If we are to focus on a definition, the online dictionary *Merriam-Webster* defines term “community” as “a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society.” However, Barbara Kingsolver has her particular interpretation of what a community should be. In 2011 at the Emory & Henry College Literary Festival, Kingsolver asserted that:

We do have some strong traditions of community in the United States, but it’s interesting to me that our traditionally patriotic imagery in this country celebrates the individual, the solo flier, independence [...] It’s ridiculous to imagine that we don’t depend on others for the most ordinary parts of our existence, let alone the more traumatic parts when we need a surgeon or someone to put out the fire in our house. In everyday ways we are a part of a network. (Kingsolver)

Bearing that in mind, Barbara Kingsolver has made use of fiction in order to create an only female community (with some exceptions) for Taylor. During her journey Taylor will create a network of female friends that will support and influence her. However, in her home town, Pittman, Taylor was part of a hierarchically structured community:

In our school there were different groups you would run with, depending on your station in life. There were the town kids, whose daddies owned the hardware station [...] Then there were hoodlums, the motorcycle types that cut down trees on Halloween. And then there were the rest of us, the poor kids and the farm kids [...] The main rule was that there was absolutely no mixing. (133)

In contrast with the traditional stratified community model, Taylor’s mother tries to teach equitable values to her daughter for her to have ambition in life, “a person isn’t

nothing more than a scarecrow. You, me, [...] and even God Almighty, as far as I can see. The only difference between one that stands up good and one that blows over is what kind of stick they're stuck up there on" (5). Furthermore, her mother plays a decisive role in Taylor's self-confidence. She nurtures her child in her upbringing, "no matter what I did, whatever I come home with, she acted like it was the moon I had just hung up in the sky and plugged in all the stars. Like I was that good" (10). Apart from her mother, Mr. Hughes Walter, Taylor's science teacher, is a crucial character as he gives Taylor the opportunity to have a real job at the Pittman County Hospital. Therefore, she is able to save enough money and leaves Pittman's retrograde community.

Since the beginning of her road trip, any male character that we find in the novel will be overshadowed by a female. Consequently, we may think that Kingsolver does this in purpose, in order to emphasize women's superiority over men. For example, in Oklahoma Taylor feels threatened by two Indian men with cowboy hats, and instead of giving them any meaningful role in the story, the writer introduces us the character of Turtle. More importantly, in that exact moment we get to know a member of Taylor's female community, her adoptive child, Turtle.

Taylor comes across minor female characters that are eager to give her a hand whenever she needs it. Mrs. Hoge, the owner of the *Broken Arrow Motor Lodge*, is a clear example of the previously mentioned, "Mrs. Hoge, was determined that I should stay awhile. She said they could use the extra help during the Christmas season [...] I was glad for the chance to make some bucks before I headed on down the pike" (35-36). Moreover, settled down in Tucson, Taylor starts working in the *Burger Derby* and there she meets Sandi, her co-worker. Being a single mother, Sandi is a source of knowledge for Taylor, "She knew all about things like how to rub an ice cube on kid's gums when they were teething, and where to get secondhand baby clothes for practically nothing" (66-67).

On the other hand, Taylor's inner circle is virtually composed by female characters. For example, Lou Ann, Taylor's housemate, is Taylor's biggest support, "I know I can depend on you Lou Ann, [...] If we sink, you'll pull us out" (94). It is necessary to highlight that Lou Ann comes from a matriarchal family, where her mother and grandmother, Granny Logan, were the main providers "A household of women for

everything, for company” (55). That situation may have influenced her as she acknowledges Taylor and Turtle as her family, “Somebody at work said, ‘Do you have a family at home?’ And I said, ‘Sure,’ without even thinking. I meant you all” (231). Furthermore, Taylor and Lou Ann’s neighbours, Edna Poppy and Virgie Mae Valentine Parsons, continue with the tradition of female households. They both live together and depend on each other.

Estevan is the exception to the rule, the only male person that Taylor allows in her inner circle, “‘I like Estevan.’ My heart sort of dumped when I said this” (112). At the beginning of the novel, we can perceive how Taylor admires Estevan and his background, but throughout the story, Taylor’s feelings will develop into love, “I lost someone I was in love with” (221). I can certainly say that Taylor is aware of the benefits that the sisterhood she has created for Turtle and herself convey, however, at the end of the of the novel, she does no longer urge an exclusively female community.

Therefore, it can be argued that *The Bean Trees* is not a story of separation; Kingsolver does not address a gender war. The author has created a fictional reality where females are not underdogs anymore, the patriarchal superiority vanishes and the stereotypically oppressed female has freed herself. Nevertheless, although they are the social group in charge, they admit males in their lives as long as they behave properly.

4.3. *Ethnicity*

After the massive immigration that the US society witnessed in the early 20th century, scholars needed to come up with new ideas to define the new multi-cultural communities. As a result, the term “melting pot” was coined, this was a cultural process that defended the assimilation of “immigrants of different ethnic and religious groups into Americans sharing a common culture— developing common attitudes, values, and lifestyles” (Bisin and Verdier 955). However, not all communities assimilated and share a common culture with the Americans, “Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italian{s}, and Irish retained distinctive economic, political and cultural patterns long after arriving in the United States” (Bisin and Verdier 956). Thus, in the 1960s a new term appeared, “the salad bowl”, “where immigrants could become ‘American’ and integrate whilst maintaining some cultural distinction” (Advani and Reich 3). The latter term still prevails in the US society, and we could use it to define Barbara Kingsolver’s approach to ethnicity. As she explains at an interview:

...as a novelist, one gets to create all kinds of minds and then put them together and look at their intersections, their interactions. Cultural differences are really exciting territory, not just for literature but for learning in general, because sparks fly when there's friction among different viewpoints. People invest themselves differently in the same set of truths. (Kingsolver)

The Bean Trees brings its readers to the 1980s American Southwest, in that period of time we can observe a salad bowl of diverse cultures, for instance, Native Americans, Mexicans or Guatemalans.

To start with, although Taylor does not completely identify herself as a Native American, "I supposedly had enough Cherokee in me [...] I knew I would never really claim my head rights" (204-205), she does not reject her cultural inheritance:

All my life, Mama had talked about the Cherokee Nation as our ace in the hole. She'd had an old grandpa that was full-blooded Cherokee [...] Mama would say, 'If we run out of luck we can always go live on the Cherokee Nation.' She and I both had enough blood to qualify. According to Mama, if you're one-eighth or more they let you in. (13)

When she first steps in the Cherokee Nation, Taylor realizes that there is no sacred land there, "My car gave out somewhere in the middle of a great emptiness" (13). In contrast to her mother beliefs, there were no remains of Cherokee culture, "The Cherokees believed God was in trees. Mama told me this [...] From what I could see, there was not one tree in the entire state of Oklahoma" (13). However, at the end of the story when Estevan, Esperanza, Turtle and Taylor drive to the heart of the Cherokee Nation in order to legalize the civil status of Turtle, we find a completely different landscape. In that moment, Taylor confirms her mother's stories about the Cherokee Nation, "It was a relief to know the Cherokee Nation wasn't a complete bust [...] It was nice to find out, after all, that Mama's and my ace in the hole for all those years really did have a few diamonds in it: Lake Oologah, Lake o' the Cherokees" (205).

Moreover, Taylor establishes her new home in Tucson, Arizona. Because of its proximity with the Mexico border, plenty of Tucson citizens were Mexicans, "There were so many Mexicans that people didn't think of them as a foreign race. They were doctors, bank clerks, TV personalities, and even owned hotels" (27). We have to say that Taylor does not interact with as many Mexicans as Lou Ann does. Lou Ann's former husband, Angel, is Mexican and that fact has led her to have empathy towards the Mexican culture. For example, she was planning to give Dwayne Ray, her baby, a Catholic baptism "for the sake of Angel's mother" (28). Lou Ann also complains about

the working conditions of the Mexicans, “‘It’s shift work’ [...] ‘He’s just got to go in when they tell him to, and that’s that. And he’s not a heathen. He was born right here in America, same as the rest of us.’ Just because he wasn’t baptized in some old dirty crick” (58-59).

In order to have a better understanding of Estevan and Esperanza’s situation, it is inevitable to address the Guatemalan Civil War which took place in 1980s. During the war, “the Mayan population of Guatemala faced genocide” (Robinson 2). Patricia M. Plantamura claims that in 2011 President Clinton:

...acknowledged and admitted wrongful acts by the United States to the people of Guatemala. Even with this admission, the American general public today seems unaware of U.S. involvement in Guatemalan internal affairs during the mid-20th century [...] Like truth and reconciliation commissions, we must first acknowledge what actually happened, before we can move forward productively to work for principled and just change to policies and institutions. (117)

Likewise, in *The Bean Trees* Kingsolver criticizes the U.S. foreign policy as well as Americans’ lack of knowledge regarding immigrants’ real situation in the U.S. Furthermore, Estevan breaks the illegal immigrant stereotype, in Guatemala he was an English teacher and even in the U.S. his English excels, “He spoke better English than the two of us combined” (91). But in the U.S. he cannot legally work as he is a refugee seeking asylum. In one of their various conversations, Stevan tells Taylor how he was tortured: “In Guatemala City the police use electricity for interrogation. They have something called the ‘telephone’ [...] They disconnect the receiver wire and tape the two ends to your body. To sensitive parts” (134). Estevan’s gut-wrenching story impacts Taylor, and she realizes that the U.S. government is partly guilty for his tragedy, “You think you’re the foreigner here, and I’m the American, and I just look the other way while the President or somebody sends down [...] telephones to torture people with” (135). We may say that this is a decisive moment of Taylor’s life as she loses her childhood’s innocence and faces the crude reality of an unfair world.

Throughout her journey, Taylor becomes aware of the injustices regarding minorities and that influences her identity and her vision of the world. For instance, she defines the Cherokee Nation as a place that you would not go “to live without some kind of lethal weapon aimed at your hind end [...] the whole intention of bringing the Cherokees here was to get them to lie down and die without fight” (13), in her words we

can perceive a clear criticism towards colonialism. In addition to that, she also criticizes American capitalist society:

While we're in here trying to keep the dry-cleaner bags out of the kid's reach, those mothers are [...] feeding them out of the McDonald's dumpster. [...] What I'm saying is nobody feels sorry for anybody anymore, nobody even pretends they do. Not even the President. It's like it's become unpatriotic. (171)

4.4. *Nature*

I am one of thousands of species that live in this place, and I don't ever forget the other ones there. Species diversity is a biological fact. I think a lot about the world out there beyond the artifice that human beings have created. As for human diversity, I'm very interested in the fact that everybody in this room has something different in mind right now. (Kingsolver)

Nature, in all its forms, is a recurrent topic in Barbara Kingsolver's fiction. During her literary career, she has made use of the knowledge acquired in her biology studies in order to create plotlines, characters, etc. Hence, it is hardly surprising the fact that *The Bean Trees* is abounding with references to nature. Nonetheless, we could say that Kingsolver offers us her own interpretation of nature as she combines natural and non-natural imagery in her writing, "Outside was a bright, wild wonderland of flowers and vegetables and auto parts. Heads of cabbage and lettuce sprouted out of old tires." (45)

The title of the novel, *The Bean Trees*, is the first item of natural imagery that we will perceive, without any context to understand its meaning, there are no metaphors that we can distinguish. Turtle is the first character that gives to the reader a hint to decode the title, the first word that she utters is "bean", which is followed by many other vegetable names, "by the end of the week she had said so many new words I couldn't have fit them all in Hungarian goulash" (100). In the chapter ten called "The Bean Tress", Turtle for the first time mentions the title of the novel:

'Bean trees,' she said, as plainly as if she had been thinking about it all day. We looked where she was pointing. Some of the wisteria flowers had gone to seed, and all these wonderful long green pods hung down from the branches. They looked as much like beans as anything you'd ever care to eat. (144)

The wisteria flowers are described as something miraculous and marvellous, later on Taylor explains that "The wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by, [...] but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles." (228) In this section,

Kingsolver is comparing the wisteria vines with Taylor and Turtle, they both are part of the bean family. Likewise, the wisteria vines needs the help of the rhizobia in order to flourish, “The rhizobia are not actually part of the plant, they are separate creatures, [...] There’s a whole invisible system for helping out the plant that you’d never guess was there” (227). This is, the rhizobia are Lou Ann, Dwayne Ray, Mattie, Estevan and the rest. Taylor and Turtle could not survive without their own rhizobia; they are a bean tree, Taylor’s chosen community is full of bean trees, of invisible helping systems. In spite of growing up under difficult circumstances and facing various handicaps on her journey, Taylor settles down on account of her helping system.

Coming back to Turtle’s vegetables list, at the end of the novel she does not only utter vegetable names, but she also pronounces her community member’s names, “there were people mixed in with the beans and potatoes: Dwayne Ray, Mattie, Esperanza, Lou Ann and all the rest. And me. I was the main ingredient” (232). This shows how Taylor has been able to create a community for her and Turtle. She has rescued an abused child and made her feel cherished and safe.

The Bean Trees is well known for mirroring symbiotic relationships, but what does it mean? According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, the term “symbiosis” may either be understood as “a relationship between two types of animal or plant in which each provides for the other the conditions necessary for its continued existence” or “a relationship between people or organizations that depend on each other equally”. A clear example of the first definition would be the previously explained relationship between the wisteria vines and the rhizobia, they both depend on each other. Talking about the characters in the book, we also find several instances of symbiosis. For example, Taylor fosters Turtle, she gives her a mother and a home out of the Cherokee Nation, and Turtle gives Taylor stability and maturity, without a baby to take care of Taylor would be a young girl wondering with no aim in life. Additionally, the illegal refugees depend on Mattie and the Sanctuary movement, an underground movement that helps refugees to relocate in the U.S., in response to her help Mattie gets esteem and love from the refugees she helps. For example, when Taylor asks her if she has grandbabies she replies, “something like that” (44), for Mattie the refugees that live with her are part of her family. The last symbiotic relationship that I am going to mention is the one made by Virgie and Edna. Being blind, Edna clearly depends on Virgie for her everyday life duties; in the case of Virgie, when she says something rude

and ignorant because of her age, Edna is the one who reprimands her. For instance, talking about the immigrants' situation in the U.S. Virgie says, "Before you know it the whole world will be here jibbering and jabbering till we won't know it's America" and Edna responds, "Virgie, mind your manners" (106).

Consequently, it can be argued that Taylor is influenced by nature, such as the wisteria vines and the bean trees, but she is also determined by natural relationships as the symbiosis.

5. Conclusion

Through this paper it has been shown how the main character of *The Bean Trees*, Taylor Greer embarks on a spiritual journey. Having the eco-feminist theory as background, Barbara Kingsolver depicts a strong young woman who does not want to be a stereotypical rural south-eastern model. From the beginning, Taylor makes clear that Kentucky is not place for her and she is willing to find her self-identity on the road. It has been proven that Taylor comes across various obstacles during her journey. First of all, gender constraints need to be mentioned, she escaped from Kentucky not to be another teen mom in a conservative society, and we cannot forget also that she changes her first name into an androgynous name. Furthermore, settled down in Tucson, Taylor creates a female network that will support her in all her choices, she is part of a non-traditional community. From a very young age she finds herself surrounded by only women, however, as the story progresses she will also accept a man in her life, Estevan. Taylor's identity is determined by the sisterhood which is helping her. Moreover, ethnicity is another critical issue of the novel, although Taylor does not utterly identify herself as Cherokee, she acknowledges the Native American's historical and cultural importance. Definitely, Taylor's character is influenced by the Guatemalan culture, being in contact with illegal refugees, removes the blindfold from Taylor's eyes, and she realizes how oblivious she was. Last, Taylor is influenced by nature as she identifies her community and her life with the wisteria vines, they both are miraculous. In general, plants play an essential role in the relationship between Turtle and Taylor.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that this novel has a sequel, *Pigs in Heaven*, published in 1993. An interesting field for further research could be the analysis of the evolution of Taylor's identity in this novel.

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