

# Plant Writing and the Imagination of Healing in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

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This article examines the plant writing in Barbara Kingsolver's 1998 novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. It argues that Kingsolver's plant writing presents a literary imagination of healing that addresses bodily illness, psychological trauma, and the pathologies of human civilization, through which she destabilizes colonial bias and anthropocentrism. By deconstructing the authority of Western medicine in colonial power structures, Kingsolver challenges the stigmatization of indigenous herbal medicine as backwardness and underscores its marginalized medical value. Furthermore, plants depicted in the novel are not passive objects as traditionally conceived, but agentive companion species with affective power that facilitates the healing of Orleanna's trauma. Ultimately, Kingsolver questions the anthropocentrism in human civilization and constructs a vision of a vegetal democracy, as described by Michael Marder, featuring decentralization, non-hierarchical relations, and inclusiveness.

*Keywords:* *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver, plant writing

## Introduction

Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* is set in the Belgian Congo in the year of 1959 and its narrative is inextricably linked to Kingsolver's own life experiences. As she noted, "some three decades after I lived in a village on the Wamba River in central Africa, I began writing a novel set in that place" (Wagner-Martin, 2024, p. 103). The African natural environment that Kingsolver observed firsthand serves as a significant element in the novel and has been widely addressed in existing scholarship. For instance, Tang (2016) argues that the novel presents two sharply contrasting pastoral imaginations: the imperial pastoral embodied by the missionary Nathan, and a decentralized pastoral constructed by Orleanna and her daughters. Meanwhile, Booth (2010) proposes that the novel not only exposes women and nature as shared victims of patriarchy but also highlights the powerful potential inherent in their interconnection.

Previous scholarship has approached nature in the novel as a holistic entity to explore the ecological ideas Kingsolver conveys. However, as the title *The Poisonwood Bible* itself suggests, plants occupy a central position in the narrative and therefore deserve more attention. With advances in plant science, plant study has emerged as a rapidly expanding field within literary criticism. Its key concerns include the recognition of both plant subjectivity and the uniqueness of plant life, as well as the exploration of the intersections between plants and issues such as race, colonialism, and politics (Fan, 2024).

Ian Tan in his monograph *Understanding Barbara Kingsolver* mentions that in Kingsolver's works, "difference allows ossified distinctions between the human and nonhuman, cultural construction and natural

immanence to break down” (2024, p. 1). In Kingsolver’s novel, “meeting-points between human and nonhuman agents across cultures and species continually offer her characters opportunities to reassess their convictions and assumptions about the ways the world works” (Tan, 2024, p. 4). *The Poisonwood Bible* most fully exemplifies such characteristics of Barbara Kingsolver’s fictions. By depicting the complex and subtle interactions between plants and humans, the novel articulates a literary imagination of healing that addresses bodily illness, psychological trauma, and the pathologies of human civilization. In doing so, it deconstructs binary oppositions between “advanced” Western medicine and “backward” herbal practices, as well as between “agentive” humans and “passive” plants, and further destabilizes the anthropocentrism.

### **Remedying Bodily Illness: Herbal Medicine Destabilizing Western Medical Authority**

Upon his arrival in Kilanga village, the American missionary Nathan perceives that the local villagers are “broken in body and soul” and he cannot see “how they could be healed” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 64) since they do not have Western medical knowledge and Christian faith. In the colonial context, Western biomedicine is deemed as authoritative discourse of civilization, one that proclaims its superiority and progressiveness while devaluing indigenous medical practices. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver questions the presumed authority of Western biomedicine, exposes its role as a colonial force that stigmatizes and devalues local herbal therapies, and affirms the distinctive value of these long-overlooked healing traditions.

Nathan regards the local healer called nganga as “witch doctor” and even “rare nut” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 161), which reveals a colonial mindset that dismisses African healing practices as superstitious. In southeast Africa, the word “nganga” refers to “a healer who practises in a particular regional style” (Hokkanen, 2010, p. 143). In the novel, the nganga is depicted as a respected local practitioner who primarily employs herbal therapies alongside spiritual healing. However, Nathan labels him as a witch doctor arbitrarily, leading his young daughter, Ruth May, to conflate the two terms and assume that “nganga means witch doctor” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 197). Postcolonial medical studies argue that “it was characteristic of medicine’s colonizing nature that it sought to establish its superior or monopolistic rights over the body of the colonized” (Arnold, 1993, p. 1408). Since the second half of the 19th century, Western medicine has adopted an increasingly antagonistic stance toward indigenous medical practices in the colonies, dismissing them as products of superstition while positioning itself as the authoritative science of rationality. Meanwhile, the novel mentions that in Kilanga, there is “a special fetish against dysentery” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 606), which highlights “the ritualistic and performative aspects of their own medical language” (Schumaker, 2011, p. 270). This kind of medical language, however, is often beyond the comprehension of Western observers, who thus “mistakenly view African medicine as essentially religious in character” (p. 270). It was under the influence of such assumptions that, in the 1920s and 1930s, the British colonial authorities enacted witchcraft ordinances in their African colonies and through these measures, “the colonial state thus made itself the arbiter of what was ‘good’ or ‘bad’ medicine” (Arnold, 1993, p. 1408).

In African colonies, the denigration of indigenous medical practices serves not only to establish the authority of Western biomedicine, but also to assert the superiority of Western civilization, especially Christian religion. In Africa, nganga is both a custodian of medical knowledge and a mediator between the ancestral and spiritual realms, functioning as a “priest of the traditions” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 161). Western missionaries represented by Nathan always regard nganga, along with African beliefs concerning health, as a major obstacle to the dissemination of Christianity. Missionaries in Africa grasped that they “were in direct competition with healers, whom they deemed the main agents of ‘non-Christian’ beliefs” (Flint, 2008, p. 112). For instance, in the early

twentieth century, Rev. Hawkins of Lansdown Mission Station in Zululand argued that “both the herbalists and witch doctors are the greatest hindrances to the Gospel and uplift of the people for they literally have the Zulus completely subject to them” (p. 112). Therefore, devaluing indigenous therapy and replacing it with Western medicine, missionaries hoped not only to heal Africans’ bodies, but also to capture their souls.

While indigenous herbal medicine has been long marginalized, its unique value should not be ignored and denied. In the novel, in contrast to her husband Nathan, Orleana appears to be more open to African herbal remedies and is willing to acknowledge their efficacy. After local resident Nelson “concocted a headache cure” made of “bark potions collected from the forest” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 174), Orleana tried this therapy and even came to rely upon it. Historically, African herbal therapies saved the lives of Europeans who lacked experience with local diseases and thus European doctors initially showed respect for African healers, even seeking their assistance and learning from their practices, but by the early 20th century, with the rise of Western biomedicine, such practices had turned out to be dismissed as unscientific and ineffective (Flint, 2008, p. 95). In fact, herbal medicine has a long history and extensive use in human world. It is the oldest form of therapy practiced by mankind, and virtually no human society has existed without some form of doctoring with plants (Griggs, 1997, p. 6). If herbal medicine is not inherently a form of superstition or ignorance, then the subsequent systematic marginalization of it should not be simply regarded as an inevitable outcome of “scientific progress”. As Barbara Griggs observes in *Green Pharmacy: The History and Evolution of Western Herbal Medicine*, the marginalization of medicinal plants in contemporary Western society is not natural or accidental, but rather the outcome of intersecting forces of commercial logic, governmental decision-making, and entrenched medical bias (1997, p. 333).

Modern Western medicine not only neglects and devalues colonial herbal practices, but also implicitly appropriates them. Although such appropriation suggests a tacit recognition of the efficacy of herbal medicine, it in essence undermines its legitimacy in public discourse through covert mechanisms. In the novel, after arriving in Kilanga, Nathan’s family consistently takes quinine tablets as a prophylactic against malaria. Quinine is an alkaloid derived from the bark of the cinchona tree. Long before the arrival of the colonizers, indigenous people in South America had already been using decoctions of the bark to treat malaria. Western scientists later isolated its active compounds, refined them into pharmaceutical tablets, and renamed them, thereby effacing the herbal origins of the remedy and fully incorporating it into the narrative of modern biochemical medicine. In the central African area depicted in the novel, quinine was expensive and was usually reserved for Western people as a prophylactic treatment (Hokkanen, 2010, p. 156). However, young Ruth May persistently and secretly refuses to swallow the valuable pills. On the surface, her choice is due to the bitterness of the chemical tablets. Symbolically, however, it is a form of resistance against the violent appropriation enacted by Western medicine.

In the novel, Adah ultimately grows into an expert in tropical epidemiology and viruses, whose reflections affirm the distinctive value of indigenous healing practices in Africa and destabilize the authority of modern Western medicine. After witnessing the nganga’s healing practices, which combine herbal remedies with ritual performance, Adah regards him as a “doctor poet” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 214), one she should like to be in adulthood. The romantic sensibility associated with the identity of the poet disrupts the conventional perception of the physician as the embodiment of pure and absolute rationality, thereby opening up new imaginative possibilities for the figure of doctor. Subsequently, during her rotations in the neonatal intensive care unit, Adah’s experiences in Africa prompt her to question the assumptions underlying Western medical practice, as she asks:

Who is to say she should not have run to the forest with her hair and umbilical cords flying, and knelt to deposit each of these three at the base of its own pine tree? Who will argue that my drips and incubators are really the wiser plan? (p. 526)

Adah's momentary reflection points out the legitimacy of therapy labelled as "unscientific", destabilizing the authority of Western medical discourse. She ultimately steps away from clinical practice mainly guided by Western biomedicine and devotes herself in the study of tropical epidemiology and viruses, after which she refers to herself as "a witch doctor" (p. 623). In this context, the term "witch doctor" does not function as a derogation but signifies a form of resistance against Western medical discourse, further destabilizing its absolute authority.

### **Mending Psychological Trauma: Agentive Plants as Companion Species**

In the novel, Orleanna and her daughters, along with plants in Kilanga, become objects of Nathan's hegemonic violence and are subjected to profound trauma. However, instead of being silent and passive, the plants depicted by Kingsolver exhibit intentionality and agency to resist. As agentive companion species, plants in the novel further reveal affective power that contributes to healing Orleanna's psychological trauma. It is precisely through her interactions and symbiosis with plants that Orleanna discovers possibilities for opening herself, reconfiguring her subjectivity, and eventually working through trauma.

In the novel, women and nature become objects of patriarchal and anthropocentric violence, both subjected to profound trauma. Nathan is both an authoritarian patriarch within the family and a missionary who believes himself to be acting under divine mandate. In his eyes, his wife Orleanna "is the earth itself, changing hands, bearing scars" (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 108). As a father, Nathan "can see no way to have a daughter but to own her like a plot of land" (p. 200). He "work[s] her, plow[s] her under, rain[s] down a dreadful poison upon her", making her like "pale slender stalks" (p. 200). Recurring metaphors that align women with land and plants reveal a shared vulnerability and a common predicament where they are all under oppression. Oppressive structures of power confine Orleanna, as she confesses, "I cowered beside my cage" (p. 244). As her subjectivity gradually collapses under such conditions, she ultimately lapses into traumatic muteness, so upon returning home from Africa, she even "seems to have gone mute" (p. 483). The same hegemonic violence is also taking place in the land of Kilanga: Harboring the delusion of constructing an American-style demonstration garden, Nathan violently "rip out long handfuls of grass with quick, energetic jerks as though tearing out the hair of the world" (p. 43), eventually making the dirt there turn into "dead, red slop like rotten meat" (p. 341).

Within the framework of traditional anthropocentrism, plants have long been perceived as entirely passive objects. However, in the novel, plants are not portrayed as passive victims. Crops' growth that does not conform to Nathan's will and the poisonwood's release of toxicity as a response to Nathan's violence demonstrate vegetal agency to resist. Contemporary research in plant sciences shows that plants exhibit numerous characteristics of active intelligence. Anthony Trewavas (2002) at first proposes the concept of plant intelligence, attempting to discredit the notion that plant life is passive and mechanical and requesting to look at the world from a plant point of view. On this basis, philosopher Michael Marder (2012) examines the systematic objectification of plant life within the Western philosophical tradition, calls for a recognition of the distinctive status of plants beyond the subject-object binary in the Western metaphysical sense, and challenges the view that confines subjectivity and agency to humans and animals. In the novel, Nathan disregards local resident Mama Bekwa Tataba's advice, which recommends making mounds to grow plants, but imposes American modes of cultivation on the land of Kilanga. In response to Nathan's imposed methods of cultivation, plants actively transform their modes of

growth—they “thrived and filled the fenced patch with bloom like a funeral parlor, but would not set fruit” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 94). To be specific, “the flowers would open and close, then the green fruits behind them would shrivel and turn brown” (p. 95). Confronted with inhospitable conditions caused by human intervention, plants continue to sustain life through the flourishing of leaves and flowers, yet refuse to yield the fruits that humans expect. Such anomalous growth reflects plants’ survival-oriented intentionality and further manifests a form of agency that resists anthropocentrism. Moreover, plants’ release of toxic substances in response to human violence likewise reflects their active resistance. When Nathan is violently wresting a small tree from the garden plot, Mama Bekwa Tataba warns “that one, brother, he bite” (p. 47). Her use of the pronoun “he” to refer to a small tree, as well as the verb “bite” to describe its action of releasing toxic sap, suggest that plants possess an intentionality and capacity of resisting and that instead of being passive and mechanical, they own unique subjectivity. The sap seeping from the ruptured bark corrodes Nathan’s skin and as the novel describes, “yellow pus, like tree sap, trickles down from his battered flesh” (p. 49). Here, the simile that likens pus to tree sap underscores the affinity between Nathan’s body and the tree trunk, thus subtly collapsing the ostensibly clear boundary between the human and the vegetal.

In Kingsolver’s writing, plants not only feature the agency to resist human hegemony, but also emerge as companion species that contribute to healing Orleanna’s trauma. According to Donna Haraway, companion species “must include such organic beings as rice, bees, tulips, and intestinal flora, all of whom make life for humans what it is and vice versa” (2003, p. 15). In the novel, plants occur as companion species in their intimate interaction with Orleanna. Deeply traumatized by the death of her young daughter, Orleanna cuts off her ties with civilized society by refusing to speak and avoiding using telephone and immerses herself entirely in gardening with the determination to “grow tragedy out of herself” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 484). Plants flourish under her attentive care, and meanwhile their exuberant growth, in turn, reshapes her, transforming her into “an entire botanical garden waiting to happen” (p. 486). This reciprocal relationship closely resonates with Donna Haraway’s notion of becoming-with, which refers to the process through which species co-emerge and co-constitute one another. It is precisely through this process that Orleanna attains the possibility of escaping hegemonic discourse, reconstructing her subjectivity and thereby achieving post-traumatic redemption. Gradually, she steps out of her secluded life and begins to “march[es] for civil rights” (p. 525). These attempts to reclaim linguistic power and engage in political activities render her increasingly resilient, as if “bullets would pass right through her” (p. 525). Orleanna’s post-traumatic transformation from muteness to voice is a testament to the point that plants, as companion species, function in the construction of human subjectivity and thus owns the affective power to heal humans’ psychic trauma.

### **Addressing Civilizational Pathologies: The Political Vision of Vegetal Democracy**

In the novel, Barbara Kingsolver deconstructs the binary oppositions between “advanced” Western medicine and “backward” herbal therapy, as well as between “active” humans and “passive” plants. More importantly, the novel further questions the anthropocentric arrogance embedded in such dichotomous thinking, presenting instead a political vision of vegetal democracy. From a phenomenological perspective, Michael Marder, drawing on the distinctive characteristics of plants, proposes the concept of vegetal democracy. Plants lack a single command center that could orchestrate all of its development and grows by replicating already existing structures (Marder, 2016, pp. 167-168). Besides, as an open system coupled with its environment, vegetal life is always in relation to all the others without exception and thus all creatures share something of the vegetal soul (Marder,

2013, p. 64). Based on his phenomenological inquiry into plant life, Marder (2013) conceptualized vegetal democracy as a decentralized, non-hierarchical, inclusive political vision.

Zoocentric and hierarchical Western attitudes toward plants prioritize the maintenance of established hierarchical ordering by ignoring the continuity of life and constructing sharp discontinuities between humans and plants, and in doing so, shared characteristics of human and plant have been rejected in order to focus on the gross differences (Hall, 2011, p. 157). Resisting such mindset, Kingsolver blurs the distinct boundary between humans and plants through her descriptive language in the novel, foregrounding their shared characteristics. In her depiction, the slender villagers in Kilanga are “swaying faintly like trees” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 22); when dancing, they wave hands “like trees in a hurricane” (p. 30); the yellow pus trickling down from Nathan’s flesh just looks like “tree sap” (p. 49); when swaying in the wood, Orleanna is “like a tree blown by wind” (p. 332) ... All these similes evoke imageries that draws human beings into an intimate resemblance with plants. Meanwhile, in the novel, plants are portrayed as beings endowed with qualities that are typically attributed only to animals: Poisonwood can “bite” (p. 47); a leaf has “heart” (p. 333); in the dry weather, kapoks and baobabs “ached and groaned in their branches” (p. 392), etc. Thus, shared characteristics between humans and plants are emphasized through Kingsolver’s vivid descriptive language, posing a challenge to the constructed discontinuities between vegetal and human life.

Apart from blurring the constructed boundary between humans and plants, the novel further dismantles the hierarchical distinction between the two, thereby destabilizing anthropocentrism in traditional Western philosophy. The Congolese boy Nelson naturally believed that “a tree is a type of person” since “they both have roots and a head”, so he “was puzzled by [Ada’s] failure to understand such a simple thing” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 253). Influenced by African animism, the hierarchy of living beings in Ada’s mind is gradually destabilized and, in adulthood, she comes to think that all the creatures are “equally resourceful beings” (p. 633) and believes fundamentally in “the right of a plant or a virus to rule the earth” (p. 636). As an expert in viruses, Ada holds respect to these microorganisms and “think[s] of them as [her] relations” (p. 634). Therefore, it can be seen that Ada’s experiences in Africa prompt a profound reorientation of her worldview, gradually giving rise to her political imagination of vegetal democracy.

In her narration, Ada repeatedly quotes lines from Emily Dickinson’s poetry, through which the vision of decentralized and non-hierarchical vegetal democracy gains resonance across temporal boundaries. As a devoted gardening practitioner, Emily Dickinson cultivated a profound emotional attachment to plants and “dwelled on how the creative energy of the botanical realm might escape, challenge, and in some ways reorganize human-centric designs” (Kuhn, 2023, p. 93). In her poems, she attributed the natural world a kind subjectivity blurring the borders that distinguish plants, animals, and humans (Kuhn, 2023, p. 114). In Ada’s narration, Dickinson’s poetic lines depicting plants and nature reoccur, such as “The Notice to the startled Grass That Darkness—is about to pass—” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 355) and “The simple News that Nature told—With tender Majesty” (p. 637). Dickinson’s poetic language which foregrounds the agency of vegetal life not only shapes Ada’s worldview within the novel, but also engages in intertextuality with the novel, jointly constructing the vision of vegetal democracy.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the final chapter titled “The Eyes of the Trees” is narrated through a perspective of tree, fully articulating the vision of decentered and non-hierarchical vegetal democracy. The preceding chapters construct a polyphonic narrative through the continual shifting among the mother’s and her four daughters’ perspectives, while the final chapter shifts the narrator from human beings to trees. First, trees, as non-

human subjects, are endowed with the capacity to witness, think, and speak, which reflects the animistic worldview in African traditions and reverses the one-way human gaze upon nature. Rather than remaining merely passive objects of human observation, plants are granted perceptual and expressive agency, thus destabilizing the anthropocentric worldview. Moreover, as it says “I am all that is here” and “the eyes in the trees never blink” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 642), the narrator here is constantly observing the ceaseless flux of world and thus is almost omniscient. Though omniscient, the narrator merely observes everything silently and believes that it “[has] no reason to judge” (p. 642), revealing a non-hierarchical worldview. Finally, as living organisms continuously exchanging nutrients with their surrounding environment, trees exist within an interconnected network of all beings. Precisely for this reason, the spirit of the deceased Ruth May appears to dwell within the trees, and their narrative voices converge at the end of the novel, offering Orleana the deeply consoling words, “I forgive you, Mother” (p. 649). The merging narrative voices of human and plants further dissolve the perceived boundary between the two, unsettling the anthropocentric order.

The political vision of vegetal democracy presented in the novel not only is decentralized and non-hierarchical, but also features the inclusiveness that emphasizes harmonious coexistence grounded in the affirmation of difference. Kingsolver, through the voice of Brother Fowles, employs the image of plant grafting to convey her thought. Brother Fowles regards nature as his own gospel, and through observing the natural world, he comes to understand God. According to him, Americans living in Kilanga “are the branch that’s grafted on here, sharing in the richness of these African roots” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 310). Plant grafting never erases differences but takes the affirmation of difference as a prerequisite for symbiotic coexistence—the rootstock and scion differ in variety, yet they can be joined at the cut surface and grow cooperatively within a structure, eventually allowing each to show its own distinct characteristics. Marder’s idea of vegetal democracy is almost perfectly reflected by the practice of plant grafting. As he notes,

...vegetal democracy is open not only to Homo sapiens but to all species without exception. Like the plantsoul itself, consonant with life’s hospitality, it stands for that which is most common and most inclusive, not by formally enveloping its contents but conversely by bringing into relief differences and divisions without which no “sharing,” no participation, no “being-with” is possible. (2013, p. 64)

In the novel, Brother Fowles is precisely a practitioner of this idea. Priest Nathan regards the indigenous beliefs in Kilanga as a difference that must be eradicated, and accordingly, the villagers fail to understand him and respond to him with hostility. In contrast, while unable to truly agree with Tata Ndu’s practice of polygamy, Brother Fowles, who believes that villagers in Kilanga are intelligent and respectful though different from himself, chooses to “respect his judgment” (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 309). With the inclusive mind, he even enables the villagers spending time with him to “profit[ed] from the teachings of Jesus” (p. 309). Through affirming and embracing difference, Brother Fowles accomplishes his own grafting onto the African roots and thus enacts the ideals of vegetal democracy.

## Conclusion

Barbara Kingsolver’s plant writing in *The Poisonwood Bible* deconstructs the hegemony of Western civilization and anthropocentrism, while constructing a multidimensional imagination related to healing, which encompasses bodily illness, psychic trauma, and the pathologies of human civilization itself. The novel dismantles the authority of Western biomedicine in colonial power structures, challenges the stigmatization of indigenous herbal practices, and emphasizes the marginalized medicinal value of plants. Meanwhile,

Kingsolver's depiction of vegetal life departs from the traditional notion of plants as silent and passive objects, instead positioning them as agentic companion species that, in their intersubjective relations with Orleanna, reveal an affective power of trauma healing. Finally, the novel questions the anthropocentrism in human civilization and envisions a decentralized, non-hierarchical, and inclusive vegetal democracy. *The Poisonwood Bible*, therefore, foregrounds plants' unique subjectivity, explores the philosophical and political implications embedded in vegetal life, and ultimately offers a prescription for confronting the civilizational prejudices in human society.

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