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FYS: God, Sex, and Earth

The Child's Perspective on Religion, Reality, and Rapport

In *The Poisonwood Bible,* Barbara Kingsolver recounts the remarkable story of the Price family in their sojourn in the village of Kilanga in the Belgian Congo. They follow the lead of evangelical Baptist missionary Nathan Price, the fiercely dominant husband and father who aims to bring people "together in their simple love for Christ," but ultimately brings about his family's destruction (168). Kingsolver employs the five female members of the family - the mother Orleanna and her four children Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May - to narrate the story through a kaleidoscopic perspective. Although the novel is very much a political allegory told against the backdrop of the struggle for independence in the Congo, Kingsolver largely incorporates themes pertaining to the areas of god, sex, earth, and the relationships among the three. Her rich, dense, and beautiful language along with genius Biblical allusions and impeccable character choice make the novel a masterpiece. Indeed, Kingsolver utilizes the narration and characterization of Ruth May Price to scrutinize the practice of religion, demonstrate the standpoint-dependent nature of reality, and illustrate the inherent balance and harmony of panentheistic vision.

First, the great value of five year-old Ruth May's point of view lies in her startling innocence. She is able to observe events and directly report their happenings with surprising

clarity and objectivity, without the manipulation and distortion that often plagues the accounts of older, more worldly narrators. In contrast to the "corrupt[ion]" that surrounds her (129), Ruth May's account has credibility. Her childish yet reliable interpretations of serious matters in the novel provide not only much needed comic relief, such as her observation of the flammable roofs in Kilanga being made of "sticks and hay like the Three Little Pigs," but also religious satire (51). She humorously characterizes Jesus as a "big" "man with long brown hair and sandals, size extra large" (155), reflecting the Western monotheistic patriarchal view of God as a transcendent, white male. Although Ruth May shares some prejudices with other members of her family, mainly her father, it is apparent that they have been taught to her. As a result, she unknowingly mocks them. She confidently classifies the Africans as "the Tribes of Ham," "cursed…to be slaves for ever and ever," because "God says" (20). However, in the same breath she incorrectly extrapolates her father's Christian teachings to an erroneous context when she says that "the colored children" must go to the zoo on Thursday because "that's in the Bible" (20). Kingsolver ridicules the excessively pious and their devout perversions, those that interpret the Bible perhaps too literally and apply it too generally and in doing so cause great harm.

Moreover, the actions of Ruth May ironically contradict her verbal regurgitations of scripture and highlight the failures of her father by juxtaposition. We see this in her lighthearted play with the Kilangan children, in which she overcomes the obstacle of language and the distinction of race while the remainder her family continues to struggle with both. Leah is "flabbergasted" to discover the "inroads" that Ruth May has made "one afternoon" when she "find[s] her playing 'Mother May I?' with half the village's children" (111). Ruth May had somehow taught them to "execute giant steps, baby steps, scissors steps, and a few other absurd locomotions" until the Congolese children reigned "victor[ious]" every time (112). Meanwhile,

the others' "Baptist ears from Georgia" inhibit their interaction with the people of Kilanga (175). Nathan maniacally raves "Tata Jesus is *bängala*!" in sermon after sermon in church, unable to differentiate between the inflections for "dear one" and "poisonwood" (490). Once again, Kingsolver demonstrates the astounding acumen that children possess in their blissful state of simplicity and imagination. She also suggests that the perspective of a child, questioning how they fit into the world and its vast splendor, may be more effective than the adult compulsion to destroy, conquer, and possess, the patriarchal colonialism of Nathan Price and countless other evangelical Christians along with their "Poisonwood Bible[s]."

With respect to different points of view, Ruth May's death by green mamba bite undoubtedly constitutes the climax of the novel and overturns the realities of the Price family. This snake, in which "the diabolical genius of nature has attained the highest degree of perfection," alludes to the "serpent" in the Garden of Eden (which with its luscious flora may not look so different from the Congo) that tempts Eve to defy the word of God and eat a forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (362). This connection is fitting because, while living, Ruth May entertained a morbid fascination with the green mamba, and it composes a major motif in her narration. During her infection with malaria, for example, Nelson presents her with a "*nkisi*" that will transport her spirit to a safe place in the case of her death (239). As her sanctuary she chooses "a green mamba snake away up in the tree," so she will no longer fear them, so she can "finally be the highest one of all" and "look down and see the whole world" (304). Ruth May, consciously or not, craves a different standpoint and a more holistic outlook. Appropriately, her death marks a major watershed: it is the death of innocence, the death of the Price family, the death of Patrice Lumumba, and a turning point for all. She represents the sacrificial lamb, who "got sick" so her dear "Mama" wouldn't "die," kept "Mr.

Axelroot['s]" diamond secret till the grave, and launched her mother into action and out of the Congo (273).

Furthermore, after death Ruth May successfully embodies the green mamba, "the eyes in the trees," with a perspective so pioneering and significant that she narrates the entirety of book seven and concludes the novel (335). Ruth May greatly matures after death in "the kingdom of somewhere else" "where everything is as it could never be" (537). She can now "see" simultaneous happenings from her high perch such as her mother and sisters in the market while Mobutu dies "in bed in his hiding place" (540). She authoritatively instructs Orleanna to 'listen;" "being dead is no worse than being alive, only different," with a "larger" "view." In this closing chapter, Kingsolver explicitly conveys the relative nature of reality. In addition, this notion that a person's standpoint determines his or her outlook on life permeates the entire novel. We can even sympathize with the abhorrent Nathan Price if we consider his position, his cowardly flight from the "Philippine jungle", and his guilt for his shameful survival at the cost of the "thousand men who didn't escape" (96). Suddenly, it seems not so ludicrous that his "obsession" turned "parts of his soul to ash" and "reb[irthed him] with a stone in place of his heart" (97). He "believed he could tell nothing but the truth" (533). Kingsolver's relates the stories of people of different backgrounds, histories, races, religions, cultures, and beliefs. Moreover, she does so through multiple narrators in the very telling of her novel to further underscore the fundamental truth in this idea.

Finally, Ruth May closes the novel with another very important theme: the religion of wholism with its oneness and balance promotes the most harmonious way of life. Panentheism holds that God exists and penetrates every element of the natural world and extends timelessly beyond. Ruth May exemplifies this unity in her afterlife. "She is all that is here." "She is *muntu*

Africa, *muntu* one child and a million," "the same everything as the tree" and the "animals" and the earth (537). Brother Fowles, very well-versed in the Bible, initially introduces this concept of the divine in all and all in the divine when he declares the "Creation" to be God's "[exact]" "word[s]" with the "the flowers and birds and all" as his "Gospel" (248). In this way, Kingsolver does not reject Christianity but suggests an alternate approach, a sort of radical incarnation, to the extreme evangelical piety of Nathan Price. "There are Christians and then there are Christians" (255).

In this rather unorthodox mode of thought, the whole of the universe functions in an unerringly balanced equilibrium. "Every life is different because you passed this way and touched history" (537). Ruth May provides the example of the okapi and the spider. Because the Price women visited the "river," the rare "okapi" flees in fear "deeper into the jungle where he finds a mate and lives through the year." The "plump, orange-bodied spider," however, is "squashe[d]" and killed by Ruth May. If the family had not come this way, the spider would live and the tree branches would [grow] larger" but the okapi would die. All are connected; "Everyone is complicit" (537). By retelling the opening events of the novel through a different narrator and at another time, Kingsolver forces us to reevaluate other events from a new standpoint in order to unearth new and perhaps deeper meanings. Adah believes that because the golden child Ruth May with strawberry curls and her Mama's favor reaches "the end of the palindrome" (365), she with dark hair and heart can live: "loss and salvation" (528). "We are the balance of our damage and our transgressions" (533). Everything is interconnected to everything else and such is the harmony of the earth. "Seedlings" thrive in "rotted tree stumps, sucking life out of death" (5). "Remember the forest eats itself and lives forever" (536). Even Mobutu's ""gold rings" "strike the floor" in "an ancient pentatonic scale," "a miraculous, brief song" of

"five separate notes" (540). Ruth May's final chapter illustrates the cycle of existence as the Price women visit the market on "another day" than that on which they visited the river (536). In saying "good-bye to Ruth May" they will also "say goodbye to their mother" and thus life and death continue in a "circular" progression (539).

Thus, Barbara Kingsolver effectively criticizes religion, portrays the subjectivity of perspective, and the synchronicity of panentheism in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Her notions of the ways in which people interact apply not only to missionary work and the grand scheme of international relations, but also on the smaller scale of everyday life. If we were to all follow her advice and truly embrace the multitude and diversity of life – probe deeper than coexistence into symbiosis - the world would spin more smoothly on its axis. Clearly, this poses an utter impossibility with a slight chance of actually happening. But there is nobility in the effort nonetheless.