

The Reconstruction of Female Subjectivity in *The Poisonwood Bible*: Navigating Dual Otherness in the Postcolonial Predicament

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Abstract: Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* is a famous work in contemporary American literature, exploring the intersections of colonialism, gender, and trauma. While existing scholarship has analyzed the novel from postcolonial and ecofeminist perspectives, a systematic study focusing on the contradictory Otherness of its white female characters, as both complicit colonial agents and victims of patriarchy, and their narrative path to healing remains underdeveloped. This paper tries to discuss from this perspective. Employing the frameworks of the postcolonial The Other and feminist trauma theory through close reading, this study analyzes the narratives of the five women from the Price's. It first examines how their trauma stems from a dual alienation, failed cultural intermediaries in the colonial context, and silenced subordinates within the patriarchal family, and becomes embodied through illness, physical strain, and death. The core argument posits that healing is achieved through narrative resistance. The women's distinct voices constitute a polyphonic practice of recovery. By seizing their own discursive authority, they dismantle the monolithic, rigid narrative represented by Father Nathan, which conflates Christian dogma, patriarchal rule, and colonial conquest and reconstruct fluid, relational selves through non-exploitative connections with the land and people of the Congo. Thus, *The Poisonwood Bible* is not merely a critique of oppression but an ecofeminist parable demonstrating that narration itself is therapeutic. True redemption lies not in condescending salvation but in humble listening, adaptation, and interdependence, offering useful materials and examples into the complexities of identity in a postcolonial world.

Keywords: *The Poisonwood Bible*; The Other; Identity; Female intergenerational trauma

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1. Introduction

Barbara Kingsolver is a prominent and significant figure in contemporary American literature. Her novels have achieved notable commercial success and critical acclaim following their publication, and she was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 2000. Her representative work, *The Poisonwood Bible*, maintained a prolonged

presence on U.S. bestseller lists, has been translated into numerous languages, and is distributed globally.

The Poisonwood Bible recounts the story of an American Christian family's missionary journey to the Congo in the 1950s. At the heart of the narrative is Reverend Nathan Price, a Baptist minister and World War II veteran, who relocates with his wife and four daughters from Georgia, USA, to the Belgian Congo. The region was then enduring a turbulent period of colonial resistance and transition. Nathan, however, perceives the Congo solely as a benighted land in urgent need of salvation through Christian civilization, viewing himself as the agent of this civilizing mission. Driven by fervent religious convictions, Nathan arrives with zealous purpose. Yet, due to profound linguistic barriers and cultural differences, he fails to realize his grandiose aspiration of enlightening the local populace. Throughout their endeavors, both in missionary work and daily life, the family encounters misunderstanding, rejection, and prejudice from the indigenous communities. Nathan's rigid dogma and actions further entangle his wife and daughters in perilous racial tensions and the burgeoning civil conflict. This trajectory culminates in the loss of their youngest daughter's life, with Nathan himself ultimately perishing in the very land he sought to transform ^[1].

The trajectories of the other principal female characters in the story, Orleanna and her daughters, who are defined by their choices between the Congo and America and their ultimate fates, profoundly refract the identity trauma and subjective awakening experienced under the dual oppression of colonialism and patriarchy ^[2]. The narratives of the Price women not only document the unique trauma arising from their conflicted positions as both colonial accomplices and victims of patriarchy but also illustrate their gradual emancipation from the anguish inflicted by these twin forces. By actively seizing discursive authority and forging new connections with the land, they ultimately achieve the reconstruction and liberation of their subjective selves.

International scholarship on *The Poisonwood Bible* employs diverse critical lenses. Kristin J. Jacobson defines it as a neo-domestic novel, revising the 19th-century domestic tradition to critique links between domestic ideology and imperialism. Susan Strehle reads the Price family as a political allegory deconstructing American exceptionalism and its Cold War impacts ^[3]. Sophie Croisy analyzes transatlantic cultural collision, showing how the novel deconstructs essentialist Southern U.S. identity. Dimock explores its radical realism, using non-human forces and disability to challenge human centrality ^[4]. Dissenting voices like Alan Neely question its historical accuracy. Collectively, these studies position the novel as key to examining genre, politics, and post-colonialism.

Domestic scholarship on *The Poisonwood Bible* in China shows a clear theoretical evolution. Initial studies, like Xu Guanglian, focused on its deconstruction of biblical narratives ^[5]. A significant shift occurred when Tang Jiannan and Li Sujie systematically introduced an eco-feminist lens, filling a critical gap and analyzing the interconnected oppression of gender, nature, and colonialism ^[2]. Research rapidly advanced toward theoretical synthesis. Building on foundational work like Xu Lei's overview of Western body theory, Tang Jiannan repositioned the novel as a feminist, postcolonial revision of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ^[6-7]. His work integrated postcolonial theory, like Bhabha's hybridity, with body and material feminist analysis, forming a sophisticated framework. Overall, Chinese scholarship progressed from singular thematic interpretations to employing diverse, internationally-informed theoretical paradigms, demonstrating active engagement with global critical discourse.

2. The contradictory other: Captives in colonial society and the patriarchal family

Upon their initial arrival in the Congo, the five female characters assume a contradictory dual role. Within the colonial context, they act as agents from Western civilized society. Within the family, they are submissive followers

of patriarchal will ^[8]. The mother, Orleanna, embodies the stereotype of wife and mother living in traditional society, responding to her husband's decision to relocate the family to the Congo with silent compliance. Her twin daughter, Leah, initially ties her self-worth to paternal approval, longing to gain her father's recognition through successful missionary work. Overall, their early actions are governed by the authority of the father, Nathan, in an attempt to civilize the Congo with the Western civilization represented by Christianity ^[5].

This dual identity might ostensibly grant them a certain authority in the Congo. However, the so-called rules of American civilization prove inapplicable to the Congo's natural environment and social fabric. For instance, Orleanna persists in maintaining American domestic routines in the rainforest, making birthday cakes, wearing American-style clothing, and implementing U.S. farming methods, which leads the local community to view her as an oddity who understands nothing of survival. Their efforts to promote civilization are perceived by locals as impractical and absurd. Their domestic helper, Mama Tataba, pointedly remarks that the family is like an infant ^[9]. In reality, they are neither accepted by what they perceive as the backward colony nor do they achieve subjective agency within the patriarchal structure. Their whiteness confers no privilege, and their lifestyle is not regarded as advanced civilization but instead subjects them to the scrutiny and gaze of the local residents. Caught between these two forces, they are rendered complete Others, entrenched in a profound trauma of belonging.

Concurrently with their colonial disillusionment, the female members of the Price family also endure intense gender oppression within the domestic sphere ^[2]. Upon the family's arrival in the Congo, Nathan Price unquestionably becomes the central axis around which all activities revolve. Externally, he is the disseminator of Christian doctrine and the self-appointed agent of civilization; internally, he is the sole male and the fountainhead of power. He exerts absolute control over his wife and daughters through verbal coercion, bodily discipline, and the institution of marriage, thereby stripping them of their subjective agency. The initial, unwavering faith and active participation of Orleanna and her four daughters in Nathan's missionary endeavor itself serve as stark evidence of their subsumed will ^[1]. The private domain of the family is far from a sanctuary; rather, it becomes the most immediate microcosm for the enactment of gender oppression ^[10]. The death of the youngest daughter, Ruth May, marks the devastating apex of this oppression's cruelty. While the mother sought to return home, the father insisted on remaining in the Congo to continue his mission. In the face of this absolute patriarchal will, the women's emotions, needs, and even their physical safety are objectified and subordinated to a delusional and obsessional patriarchal goal.

The unique and agonizing predicament of the Price women, their contradictory feeling of Otherness, is forged precisely under the dual pressures of the colonial environment and the patriarchal family. As newcomers, they belong neither to their American homeland nor to the local Congolese society ^[11]. These two layers of Otherness reinforce each other, trapping them in a state of psychological trauma characterized by a profound lack of belonging, exiles not only from America and the Congo, but even from a secure place within their own family. This fundamental dislocation is the root of their collective trauma. The novel's very form constitutes a literary rebellion against this dual oppression. By employing a multi-perspective female narrative, it displaces the omniscient, unitary voice of God traditionally associated with the Bible ^[5]. The mother and four daughters of the Price family are granted distinct narrative threads and emotional landscapes, creating a polyphony of female voices. This narrative strategy effectively dismantles the singular authority represented by the father Nathan, who is the authority that conflates Christian doctrine, patriarchal rule, and colonialism. The suppressed female experience, channeled through these individual discursive avenues, ultimately coalesces into a New Testament that challenges monolithic truth, thereby performing a fundamental literary judgment upon the oppressor ^[2].

3. Embodied trauma: Strain, illness, and death

The trauma endured by the Price women is rooted in their contradictory Otherness, and it first permeates their lives in a subtle, quotidian, yet relentless manner^[1]. Within the family, patriarchal oppression operates through micro-level powers enacted upon each member. The eldest daughter, Rachel's pursuit of beauty and fashion, is wholly dismissed by her father, and her desire for marriage is entirely absent from his consideration. The twin sister Leah's devotion and allegiance are seen by Father Nathan merely as a useful tool; when Leah grows close to Congolese culture and even falls in love with a Black teacher, the first thing her father is concerned about is not her will but her perceived betrayal of Christianity. The twin sister Adah's physical disability is consistently viewed by her father as God's punishment. His consequent denial of care results in her psychological withdrawal, forcing her to endure long-term neglect and emotional cold violence. The physical strain from labor, the gendered scrutiny and control, and the psychological terror of the Congolese jungle experienced by the mother Orleanna are interpreted by Nathan simply as insufficient piety and weak faith, showing complete disregard for her inner world. Her independent self is gradually eroded through this daily grind. This oppression extends beyond the father's patriarchal control within the family and social sphere, and the backlash of colonial politics further Others the women^[1]. The local community does not blindly accept or revere the so-called civilization of white society. Instead, their gaze is often deconstructive and reciprocal. The colonizers' self-proclaimed myth as agents of civilization is thereby exposed in its futility and inherent violence^[5]. Trauma, channeled through the female body, seeps from daily minutiae into the psyche's depths. It culminates in the concentrated eruption of the youngest daughter's death, which thereby becomes the critical node for the intergenerational transmission of the family's trauma.

The innocence of the youngest daughter, Ruth May, functions as a singular glimmer of light within the oppressive family environment^[12]. Her tender age allows her to bypass cultural barriers, establishing a direct linguistic and emotional connection with local children. This pure connection, untainted by oppressive or colonial intent, serves to throw the distortions of colonialism and patriarchal oppression into stark relief. Consequently, her death becomes an inevitable culmination, the critical catalyst for the family's disintegration, and a new form of colonial trauma inextricably linked to familial bonds for her mother and sisters^[3]. This tragedy systematically illustrates the operation of colonialist and patriarchal violence. In Nathan's eyes, Ruth May is not an independent individual but a divine messenger—an abstract symbol^[13]. Thus, he obsessively insists she perform baptisms in the dangerous crocodile-infested river, disregarding both local warnings and Ruth May's own palpable fear. When his daughter faces illness and mortal danger, he rejects all secular medical intervention, resorting only to hollow prayer. Nathan's obsession represents an extreme fusion of patriarchal authority and colonial arrogance, which precipitates a survival crisis for the entire family and directly leads to his youngest daughter's death. The ultimate form of physical trauma is death. Ruth May's death is not merely a family tragedy but the author's direct critique of patriarchal authority and colonial arrogance^[5]. Her demise constitutes the most direct, innocent, and profound casualty of colonial expansion and patriarchal oppression: it results not merely from paternal failing, but from the inevitable confluence of two systemic violences: colonialism's dismissal of local knowledge and patriarchy's disregard for the safety of women and children. Her body becomes the ultimate site consumed by this dual violence^[6-7].

Nathan's oppression of his wife and daughters is, in essence, a manifestation of the spiritual colonization of women under patriarchy^[13]. He packages his own will as the divine will of God, imposing it upon each individual and stripping each woman of her subjective value. In his eyes, Orleanna is the model of obedience; Rachel, a tool

for marital alliance in service of the mission; Leah, an instrument for carrying out missionary work; Adah, God's punishment; and Ruth May, God's messenger and symbol^[1]. He singularly fails to recognize these five women as themselves. Their subjectivity is erased and distorted into an instrument servicing his grand narrative. Thus, the trauma in the novel is far from an abstract concept. Within the environment of colonial politics and patriarchal oppression, it becomes embodied in the bodily experiences of women through the forms of illness, disability, repressed desire, and death. The Congo's distinct ecological environment and social order act as a catalyst, intensifying the trauma inflicted upon the female body and psyche. Ruth May's death represents the most tragic and concentrated eruption of trauma within this catalytic process^[5].

4. Therapeutic resistance: Reconstructing subjectivity from silence to outburst

The Poisonwood Bible achieves its breakthrough not only through its thematic critique of colonialism and patriarchy but also in its very form, which constitutes a therapeutic resistance. The novel's title itself presents an exquisite metaphor^[5]. What Father Nathan devoutly adheres to is precisely a Bible that has become alienated in the Congolese soil, a doctrine intended to nourish life but which, due to its colonialist arrogance and patriarchal core, transforms into a poisonous element that sickens the family and fractures the community. The trauma of the Price women originates from this very poisonwood. The novel integrates religious elements not merely into its plot but also extensively employs structural and textual allusions to the Bible in its chapter design and textual references^[5]. This narrative strategy functions not just as a parodic mimicry of biblical narrative modes but, more importantly, as a deconstructive appropriation that dismantles its authority. Women and colonized peoples, sharing the position of the Other, nevertheless seize discursive authority from their silenced and marginalized spaces through observation and reflection, thereby challenging the Western tradition of monolithic truth-telling.

The five female characters employ distinct narrative voices^[5]. Their progression from initial, unquestioning compliance with colonial and patriarchal dictates to the courageous confrontation and expression of their internal emotional transformations forges a literary space where trauma can be articulated and subjectivity reconstructed^[10]. Their early narratives are largely steeped in confusion and suppression regarding their present lives and suffering, as well as internalized patriarchal values. Their later accounts, however, evolve toward a clearer sense of personal pursuit, incorporate a degree of critique toward the oppression and injustice they endure, and demonstrate independent judgment. This evolution in itself constitutes an act of resistance, establishing a crucial foundation for the reconstruction of the women's own subjectivity.

A close examination of the actions of the Price women reveals that each undertakes a journey of therapeutic healing through resistance^[2, 4]. The mother, Orleanna, progresses from silence to outburst. Embodying the archetypal wife and mother of traditional society, she initially exhibits silent compliance to her husband's decision to relocate to the Congo, her early narrative suffused with self-discipline. However, prolonged exposure to her husband's obsessive oppression and local alienation in Africa, culminating in her youngest daughter's death, catalyzes her awakening. Her language shifts from indirect, restrained lamentation to direct action. Her ultimate decision to leave her husband and return to the U.S. with her daughter, Adah, is not merely a physical act but also a simultaneous construction of self-consciousness in both narrative and reality. It marks her reclamation of discursive authority from her husband, authoring her own Exodus^[5]. The eldest daughter, Rachel, serves as a symbol of contemporary American materialism and consumerism^[12]. Her narrative is consistently filled with materialistic rhetoric and exaggerated complaints, which function precisely as a defense mechanism against

trauma. Her reliance on beauty and whiteness for material gain in Africa may appear superficial, yet it constitutes an assertion of her own needs. She is also the most vocally assertive among the five, from outright rejecting an undesired marriage to ultimately establishing herself narratively as the proprietress of a hotel. Her language consistently contests the definition of her own fate, refusing to be arranged by colonial predicament or patriarchal authority. The narrative of the twin sister, Leah, represents the most thorough and revolutionary self-reconstruction^[2]. Initially attaching her self-worth to paternal approval, the oppressive life in the Congo allows her to see the absurdity of her father and the suffering colonialism inflicts. She transfers her sense of value from father-dominated to herself and the Congo. By choosing to remain in Africa, she genuinely understands and integrates with the land, rather than seeking to forcibly alter it by American standards. The reconstruction of her subjectivity is completed through her narrative of commitment to African development, not condescending missionary work. The twin sister, Adah, whose congenital disability affords her a kind of calm and observational perspective on the world, returns to the U.S. with her mother after experiencing life-and-death crises in Africa, like the ant swarm attack. Whether in turbulent Africa or her homeland, she persists in physical struggle and academic pursuit. Her healing manifests in transforming the alienation born of trauma into a potent critical perspective and an independent selfhood^[4]. The analyses above illustrate their respective methods of re-anchoring the self, displacing definitions previously imposed by the father and the colonizer. Nathan's death in a foreign land lonely stands as a direct manifestation and result of the women's emergence from patriarchal oppression and their achievement of self-healing^[13]. He dies alone in a forgotten tower, which is a finally abandoned colonial edifice. This symbolizes the utter failure of his isolated, lofty worldview and announces the complete bankruptcy of his absolute patriarchy, blind religious fanaticism, and culturally arrogant colonialism. It throws into sharp relief the therapeutic power and vitality of the women's relational narratives.

The healing journey of the Price women ultimately points toward a possibility of profound historical significance that transcends personal trauma: redemption across cultural wounds^[2]. This redemption is not achieved through simple forgetting or detachment but through the establishment of a new, non-exploitative relationality. The novel presents this vision through one ideal and one practical path, embodied respectively in the life and death of the youngest daughter, Ruth May, and the reconstruction and praxis of Leah. Ruth May and Leah illuminate two dimensions of healing deep cultural trauma: the first is a return to and longing for an unalienated human essence; the second is the conscious construction of a new community through equal love, shared labor, and a common fate within complex reality. Ruth May, with her innocence uncorrupted by patriarchy and colonialism, represents the first dimension as a pure, prelapsarian connection. Leah, having broken the chains of paternal-colonial authority and actively rebuilt her life, embodies the second—a chosen, ethical bond forged in awareness and struggle^[10]. Ultimately, through the polyphonic narratives of its female characters, *The Poisonwood Bible* depicts women who reclaim discursive authority. No longer defined as the Other by patriarchy and colonialism, they use their unique voices and paths to complete a scriptural rewriting from the marginalized perspective, a New Testament that reconstructs their own subjectivity^[6]. This new *Bible* no longer proclaims a singular truth and conquest but narrates the articulation of trauma, the rebuilding of relationships, and a difficult yet possible redemption that bridges profound divides.

5. Conclusion

Through its polyphonic female narrative, *The Poisonwood Bible* exposes the profound moral and practical

downfall of a modernizing initiative ^[8]. Epitomized by the father, Nathan Price, who merges religious fervor, patriarchal authority, and colonialism. It vividly recounts the Price women's ordeal, dramatizing the unique trauma and arduous awakening of contradictory Others caught in the double bind of colonial and patriarchal oppression. The novel's multi-perspective structure points toward an ethic of traumatic redemption that subverts patriarchal tradition. This ethic is relational rather than dominative, grounded in listening rather than preaching, and advocates adaptation over conquest. Kingsolver's writing is an ethical practice ^[2]. By granting five distinct and imperfect female voices narrative authority, she rejects a singular redemptive narrative, embodying the postcolonial and feminist respect for complexity, contradiction, and situatedness. The brilliance of *The Poisonwood Bible* lies not only in its critique of oppressive systems but also in its demonstration ^[2, 10]. Through these narrative voices, the possibility of post-traumatic subjective reconstruction. This reconstruction does not seek a return to an essentialized self. Instead, it is achieved by acknowledging vulnerable existence, accepting the difference of the Other, and reorienting the self within relationships.

Thus, the novel stands as a profound ecofeminist parable. It suggests that true redemption stems not from an exalted Bible but from humble recognition and deep connection to the land beneath one's feet, the life that surrounds, and the differences between oneself and others. Ultimately, it is a story about learning to live responsibly and interdependently in a world teeming with both life and peril. This essay, by examining the perspective of the white female Other in *The Poisonwood Bible* and avoiding a simplistic binary of oppressor versus oppressed, seeks to offer a reference for understanding the intricate complexities of the discourse of identity and belonging in postcolonial literature at large.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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