



The Poisonwood Bible as a Case Study for a Reader-Response Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The research study *The Poisonwood Bible* as a Case Study for a Reader-Response Analysis of Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* discusses the novel's analysis of religion, culture, and human resilience amid the context of post-colonial Africa. It examines the impact of a book on readers while examining the writer's background, way of writing and environmental issues. In particular, subparagraphs of the research gap highlight areas where further investigation could be carried out concerning Congo characters' perspectives, post-colonial analyses, reader replies, and the relationship between gender and environmental variables. Research questions focus on reader response theory and its relation to literary analysis. The process entails qualitative textual analysis. The study is intended to give a comprehensive insight into the complicated structure of *The Poisonwood Bible*.

1. Introduction

The Poisonwood Bible, by Barbara Kingsolver, examines the delicate relationship between society, faith and humanity's persistence. The novel follows the turbulent history of Post-colonial Africa and gives a terrible insight into its effects on cultural conflicts and religious fervour. The story follows Price's family, led by the devoted Baptist pastor Nathan Price, on a tragic visit to Belgium Congo in 1959. As the family struggles with terrible facts about the Congo and the complex challenges, Kingsolver assembles several people whose existence is forever affected by rock cliffs and fierce debates over conflicting views.

In a world of conflict between personal beliefs and the complexity of foreign communities, readers will find themselves transported to *The Poisonwood Bible*. They'll feel how their actions affect them over time. Readers relate thoroughly to the novel's exploration of sorrow atonement and the lingering impacts of the era of colonialism, resulting in a wide range of ideas and perspectives.

Barbara Kingsolver, an American writer, essayist, and poet, was born on April 8, 1955. Kingsolver's books are based on a passion for nature and a keen knowledge of environmental issues in an ecological framework. Her vast collection of works, including works such as *The Poisonwood*

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Bible, Bean Trees and Prodigal Summer, is appreciated by a wide audience for its social significance, powerful stories and how it deals with complex subjects.

A commitment to social progress and profound sympathy for how humans survive are aspects of Kingsolver's unusual storytelling style. Her ability to craft intricate tales of different characters illustrates her talent for art, and she has won several awards, including the National Humanities Medal.

The connections between politics, culture and the environment are frequently explored in Kingsolver's writing as a writer. Examining the subjects mentioned above in *The Poisonwood Bible* demonstrates her capacity to craft stimulating novels that connect with readers across cultural and regional divides.

In this research, we peel back the various layers of *The Poisonwood Bible*, looking at how Kingsolver's history, both as a writer and as a person formed by her personal experiences and verdicts, impacts the narrative's richness and philosophical impact. Evaluating the novel's relevance across the larger literary world requires an examination of Kingsolver's creative accomplishments.

Although *The Poisonwood Bible* has earned significant recognition for its in-depth examination of cultural disputes, convictions, and the long-term ramifications of colonial history, there are particular areas within the novel's background possibilities to conduct additional study by scholars.

While the novel provides a detailed account of the Price family's experiences in the Congo, there needs to be more study space to comprehend the influence of the Price family's goal on the native inhabitants of Kilanga. Studying the views of the Congolese characters and their villages yields a more complete grasp of the novel's social circumstances.

Moreover, one additional gap exists in evaluating *The Poisonwood Bible* from a post-colonial standpoint. Assessing how the novel moves through and confronts colonial narratives and portrayals would add to the discourse about

how Africa and its residents are portrayed in Western literary works.

Additionally, while the novel delves into the complexities of cultural clashes, there is a research gap in understanding how readers from diverse backgrounds respond to and interpret these cultural dynamics. Examining reader responses and assessing cultural sensitivity in the novel's reception can enhance our understanding of its impact on a global readership.

Furthermore, the novel portrays the Price family's experiences primarily through the lens of the female characters. However, there is a research gap in exploring gender dynamics and feminist perspectives within the novel. A deeper analysis of how female characters navigate patriarchal structures and contribute to the family's dynamics could provide valuable insights.

Barbara Kingsolver, known for her background in biology, often incorporates ecological themes into her works. There is a research gap in examining how environmental elements and the Congo's natural landscape contribute to the novel's narrative and themes. Exploring the ecological dimensions of the narrative can enrich our understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and their environments.

2. Research Questions

- What are the fundamental principles and components of Reader-Response Theory as applied to literary criticism?
- In what ways do readers' subjective experiences, beliefs, and cultural contexts influence their interpretations of the characters in the novel?

3. Research Objectives

The research aims to investigate and analyze the diverse reader responses to critical dialogues and quotations in Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *'The Poisonwood Bible,'* through Reader-Response Theory. The study aims to understand how readers' personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and individual perspectives influence their interpretation of character perspectives, cultural clashes, narrative perspectives, and selected quotations within the

novel. By examining these aspects, the research provides insights into the dynamic interaction between readers and the text, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics within the narrative.

4. Research Methodology

The researcher has employed a qualitative research methodology focusing on textual analysis to study the novel *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, which thoroughly examines and interprets the text to uncover underlying themes, character dynamics, and narrative elements.

5. Literature Review

(Davis, 1981) has brilliantly claimed that reading literature is an adventure in which readers use emotions and narratives to build meanings. Reader-response theory is not a prefabricated paradigm but rather a group of experts who embrace the goal of shifting from textual theories to the research of reading. Several reader-response opponents are committed to alternative theories such as feminist thought, post-structuralism, and existentialism. Confident reader-response thinkers research readers from a social standpoint, while others investigate readers from an analytical perspective. Some are primarily concerned with the text, while others are concerned with the reader (Scott, 1994).

According to (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), readers constitute experienced developers, and what they read is an engaging input that provides an overview, an overseer, a blueprint, and a pathway for analysis. The text stimulates the reader's initial interactions with literature and life, governs the choice, rejection, and arrangement of what comes forward, and controls whatever is presented to the reader's focus.

A reader-response explanation demonstrates how a piece of writing interacts with the reader's likely understanding, expectations, or motives. It is occasionally presumed that the author intended to create a particular reading sensation. The mutual awareness of cultural traditions and the summons of possible reading methods connect the aim with the planned reaction. Genuine variations among readers or reading settings that lead to incomplete

or construed in a manner that is a possible barrier to intentional. Numerous reading methods, resulting in multiple readings, have been proven empirically (Hansen & Bleich, 1975; Colby, 1984; McGrath, 2010; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Johnson, 2000; Lamont, 2000; Pippin, 2010).

(Lamerichs & Rosendo, 2022) The link between emotional response evaluations and time spent reading phrases from the first 510 and 840 words of Virginia Woolf and Hemingway's novels was evaluated. The written works were separated into four portions, and the link between affect levels and reading times was discovered to change from section to section.

Perhaps the most sociological uses of reader response theory have investigated how individuals use text to manage their lives or how they utilize literature as equipment for living (Huddy et al., 2015; Colby, 1984; McGrath, 2010; Lamont, 2000).

Afterwards, (Dewhurst et al., 2009) proved that a reader's viewpoint additionally impacts the transmission of narrative information throughout the reading process. It ought to have been noted; nevertheless, that 'perspective' in this study constituted a task component generated in the people engaging in the experiment rather than a textual parameter.

6. Reader-Response Theory as a Theoretical Framework

Reader-response theory, situated within the broader realm of literary criticism, focuses on the reader's subjective experience as a fundamental component in the interpretation and meaning-making of a text. Originating in the 20th century, this theoretical approach rejects the notion of a fixed or singular interpretation of a literary work. Instead, it emphasizes the dynamic interaction between the text and the reader. The theory posits that readers bring their own experiences, beliefs, and cultural contexts to the reading process, thereby influencing the creation of meaning.

The reader-response theory is particularly pertinent in the analysis of characters. Readers' responses to feelings may change according to their backgrounds, opinions, and beliefs. The study is enriched by comprehending how readers

feel associated with or separate themselves from the characters.

The concept serves a purpose in researching how readers from varied cultural backgrounds interpret and respond to cultural elements in a text. It allows for evaluating how different cultural backgrounds influence the reader's understanding of the narrative.

Reader-response theory ideas have nothing to do with various narrators or divergent viewpoints throughout a book. Examining how different storytelling techniques affect readers gives knowledge about the perceptive creation of value.

Choosing significant quotations enables a more in-depth assessment of readers' responses to certain literary aspects. The intricacies of the reader's involvement can be revealed through examining how they understand and psychologically react to specific sentences or interactions.

7. Applying The Theory in The Novel

Reader-response theory provides a comprehensive and all-encompassing framework for comprehending the intricate relationships between readers and written works. When utilized with *The Poisonwood Bible*, this theoretical approach facilitates a detailed examination of how particular readers' views, emotions, and cultural histories alter their perception of the novel, giving a more profound comprehension of its themes and impact. The novel's varied plot and characters allow for several possibilities to investigate how readers interact with and respond to the text.

According to Reader-Response Theory, readers contribute their emotions and viewpoints to the text. Dialogue that includes Leah's observations on her father's thoughts,

My father says a girl who fails to marry is veering from God's plan— that's what he's got against college for Adah and me, besides the wasted expense—and I'm sure what he says is true. (Page. 125)

- Chap# Leah from Book 2

The character expresses a conflicted perspective shaped by their father's beliefs. The reader-response analysis from the character's perspective suggests a complex emotional reaction, combining a sense of obligation to adhere to traditional values with a hint of scepticism regarding the father's stance on education. The mention of the father's objection to college and the perceived deviation from God's plan adds a layer of tension and internal conflict for the character.

He paused for breath and began again, swaying ever so faintly as he sang out: The Lord rideth in the person of His angels of mercy, His emissaries of holiness into the cities on the plain, where Lot dwelled amongst the sinners! (Page. 28).

- Chap# Rachel Price from Book 1

The character reflects a heightened emotional state by vividly describing the speaker's physical actions. The swaying motion and the passionate proclamation about divine intervention evoke a sense of enthusiasm and perhaps urgency. From the character's perspective, the reader-response analysis may reveal a mix of awe, fascination, or scepticism towards the speaker's intense religious rhetoric, shaping their understanding of the scene and the characters involved.

The novel portrays cultural clashes between the Price family and the Congolese people. Dialogues between the characters and the locals, such as Nathan Price's interactions with Chief Ndu, can evoke different responses from readers. Some may view Nathan as misguided, while others might sympathize with his struggles in an unfamiliar and challenging environment. Leah's dialogue portrays cultural conflict,

God's word, brought to you by a crew of romantic idealists in a harsh desert culture aeons ago, followed by a chain of translators two thousand years long. (Page. 197)

- Leah from Book 3

It represents a clash between the timeless religious message and its transmission's specific cultural and historical context. The reference to a chain of translators two thousand years long

highlights the complexity and potential distortion of the original message over time and across different cultural lenses. This dialogue prompts readers to consider how cultural nuances and interpretations may impact their understanding of religious texts.

Moreover, another factor of cultural clashes present in the given scene,

Nelson went and got Anatole, pulling him by the hand like he was a note from home. Anatole said the Congo people don't like owls because an owl flies around at night and eats up the souls of dead people. And there's just way too many of them here lately, he said. Too many sick children for people to abide an owl hanging around and looking at them with his eyes still hungry. (Page. 131)

- Ruth May from Book 2

The cultural clash is evident through Anatole's perspective on owls within the context of the Congo culture. The description of Nelson pulling on Anatole like he was a note from home suggests an attempt to bridge understanding between different cultural perspectives. Anatole's belief that the Congo people dislike owls because they are believed to consume the souls of the dead underscores a clash between Western notions of owls as symbols of wisdom and the Congo people's association with them as ominous creatures. The presence of too many owls becomes a source of concern due to the cultural belief that they may be responsible for the increasing number of sick children, highlighting the clash between superstition and rational explanations.

Multiple narrators, each with a unique voice, allow readers to respond differently to the same events. For example, Orleanna's dialogue reflecting on her marriage,

I married a man who could never love me, probably. (Page 14)

- Orleanna Price, Book 1

It serves as a focal point for reader-response analysis, prompting reflections on the complexities of marital relationships and

individual interpretations of Orleanna's emotional state. Moreover, readers' responses may differ based on their understanding of Orleanna's character and her experiences.

Also, narrative subjectivity is presented by another example,

I believe in God with all my might, but have been thinking lately that most of the details seem pretty much beneath His dignity. (Page. 36)

- Leah from Book 1

It reflects a narrative that invites readers to engage personally with the speaker's contemplation on faith. The narrator's assertion of a steadfast belief in God is a focal point, drawing readers into a contemplative space. The phrase, with all my might, underscores the intensity of the speaker's conviction, setting a tone of sincerity. However, the subsequent admission of questioning the relevance of specific details to God's dignity introduces a nuanced layer, encouraging readers to reflect on their theological perspectives. It invites readers to ponder the intersection of faith and the questioning of religious conventions, thereby enriching the narrative experience through personal interpretation and response.

8. Quotations Analysis

Selecting key quotations allows for an in-depth examination of reader responses. For instance, analyzing the scenario,

I do realize Jesus lived the life of poverty, but that was another place and time. A harsh desert culture, as Brother Fowles had said. You need enough to pay for food and doctors and all. (Page. 224)

- Leah from Book 3

This reference prompts the historical circumstances surrounding Jesus and suggests a contextual shift, acknowledging the harsh desert culture as emphasized by Brother Fowles. The quotation "You need enough to pay for food and doctors" underscores a pragmatic interpretation of religious teachings, emphasizing the practical necessities of life. This pragmatic stance invites

readers to contemplate the relevance of ancient teachings in contemporary contexts.

Furthermore, Rachel Price also represents the Quotation factor,

The last one. Old Testament. Second Maccabees 13:4: 'But the King of Kings aroused the anger of Antiochus against the rascal. (Page. 386)

- Chap# Rachel Price, Book 5

The mention of a specific biblical passage, Second Maccabees 13:4, indicates a more direct engagement with religious text. The choice of this quotation introduces an intertextual layer, prompting readers to connect the narrative with historical and scriptural references. The reader's response to these dialogues may involve a reflection on the adaptability and interpretative fluidity of religious teachings and an exploration of the intersection between historical context and timeless wisdom.

9. Conclusion

The introduction provides a concise overview of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, highlighting its themes of culture, religion, and human perseverance in post-colonial Africa. Kingsolver's background, dedication to societal improvement, and ecological themes are briefly emphasized. The research gap identifies key exploration areas, including Congolese characters' perspectives, post-colonial analysis, reader responses, gender dynamics, and ecological dimensions.

The subsequent section outlines research questions and objectives centred on applying Reader-Response Theory for qualitative textual analysis. The literature review acknowledges the role of emotions in literary reading, introduces reader-response theory as a flexible paradigm, and discusses sociological applications. Chapter 3 underscores the theory's relevance, particularly in character analysis and understanding cultural components. The content effectively establishes a solid foundation for the research study, encapsulating the novel's significance and the theoretical framework while highlighting critical gaps for exploration.

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