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Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees* as Political Critique of U.S. Foreign Policy and Imperialist Western Practices

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**Abstract:** This essay documents Barbara Kingsolver’s use of fictional characters and situations to instill in her reader a type of empathy that supports her own political agenda. In her novel, *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver presents a subplot that details the plight of Esperanza and Estevan, two Guatemalan refugees fleeing their country from political persecution. In exposing the hardships the Guatemalan couple face as illegal immigrants in the Unites States, Kingsolver expresses her own political critique of American foreign policy and immigration law. Specifically, this essay will focus itself on the way in which her novel, *The Bean Trees* provides political critique on U.S. foreign policy and its intervention in the Guatemala civil war. Additionally, the essay will examine the novel’s protagonist Taylor, and her shift from a naïve worldview as representative of Kingsolver’s agenda aimed at convincing her readers to become more politically conscious.

**Keywords:** Political critique through fiction; Political activism; American foreign policy; Immigration law; Guatemalan Civil War; Western Imperialism

In her novel *The Bean Trees*, Barbara Kingsolver presents a subplot that details the plight of Esperanza and Estevan, two Guatemalan refugees fleeing their country from political persecution. In this novel, as in many of her novels, Kingsolver uses fictional characters amidst real-world situations to instill in her reader a type of empathy that supports her own political agenda. She explains this with general reference to fictional works in a 1993 address at the American Booksellers Convention stating, “I believe the creation of empathy is a political act . . . That is why I feel lucky to get to do what I do: I get a little shot at changing the world.” (Krumholz, Riley, and Torrens 98). Throughout this essay, I will show that by exposing the hardships the Guatemalan couple face as illegal immigrants in the Unites States in *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver expresses her own political critique of American foreign policy, immigration law, and the United States’ involvement in human rights abuses committed during the years of the Guatemalan civil war. Additionally, I will chart the novel’s protagonist Taylor, and her shift from a naïve worldview as representative of Kingsolver’s agenda aimed at convincing her
readers to become more politically conscious and “connected to ideals of justice and equality” (Krumholz, Riley, and Torrens 94).

Through the eyes of the novel’s protagonist Taylor, the reader of The Bean Trees is introduced to Guatemalan refugees Esperanza and Estevan. Their struggle mirrors the reality of many Latin Americans during the time that Kingsolver wrote and published her novel. Set in the early 1980’s, The Bean Trees takes place during the Guatemalan Civil War in which the Mayan population of Guatemala faced genocide and according to unbiased international organizations, “the majority of killing was of innocent civilians” (Plantamura 114). Leading up to the civil war, the masses of Guatemalan society living in extreme poverty and without access to basic human rights, and were dominated by a class of elites who owned much of the country’s land (Pierce 1). In his essay highlighting various causes of the conflict, David Pierce notes that land not owned by the governing elites in Guatemala was “owned by multinational corporations, such as the U.S. owned United Fruit Company in the 1940s and 50s, which had little concern for the well-being of local populations” (1). With this, Pierce draws a connection between the unequal distribution of wealth and the result of disproportionate land ownership as heavily influenced by the presence of a U.S. company. This particular struggle is one that scholar and activist, Harsha Walia speaks to in her chapter titled “What Is Border Imperialism?” with regards to her claim that “global capitalism exerts a structural violence over whole populations and makes it impossible for them to survive in their homeland” (43).

While the revolutionary atmosphere and the period of conflict that followed had its roots in the grossly unbalanced distribution of wealth within Guatemalan society, the peak of the conflict occurred at the hands of U.S. involvement. In 1944, a civilian government was elected with hopes that President Jacobo Arbenz would fulfill promises of ambitious land reforms
These hopes were short-lived as the land reforms “came to conflict with the interests of the powerful multinational corporations” (Center for Justice) in the area. In 1954 the United States led a coup d’état that replaced the elected government with the regime of Carlos Castillo. Additionally, the local conflicts in Guatemala took place within the context of the Cold War and the U.S. government was concerned at the revolutionary atmosphere and communist politics of Cuba and Nicaragua (Pierce 1). Walia’s theory of “border imperialism” is relevant to the U.S. intervention in the sovereign state of Guatemala as it represents “the extension and imposition of Western rule, with the current dynamics of global empire maintaining unequal relationships of political, economic, cultural and social dominance of the West” (42). Furthermore, she maintains that “border imperialism not only makes possible the transgression and violation of non-Western communities’ autonomy in order to maintain the interest of Western empire, it also denies any accountability for its own victims” (42). The years following the U.S. intervention and overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz erupted in civil war and state-sponsored violence against Guatemalan civilians, specifically the indigenous Mayan population who government forces perceived as “natural allies of insurrection, and thus as enemies of the state” (Center for Justice). Years of bloodshed resulted in many Guatemalan refugees seeking asylum in the United States. The subplot that Kingsolver develops within The Bean Trees focuses on Esperanza and Estevan’s story of flight from Guatemala in the years following the Armas government and the risks they face as illegal immigrants at the hands of a restrictive immigration policy under the Reagan administration.

Taylor is first introduced to the couple by Mattie, a woman who provides the space above her car garage as a sanctuary to refugees: “There was another whole set of people who spoke Spanish and lived with her upstairs for various lengths of time. I asked her about them once, and
she asked me something like had I ever heard of a sanctuary” (105). Taylor’s initial ignorance is displayed here in the novel and for Kingsolver, is representative of an American population who is manipulated and kept in the dark about the U.S. involvement in Guatemala its effects in civilian deaths and widespread human rights violations against thousands of innocent people. In her graduate thesis titled “Impacts of U.S. Foreign Policy and Intervention on Guatemala: Mid-20th Century,” Patricia Plantamura discusses an apology issued years after the war by U.S. President Bill Clinton during a trip to Guatemala City:

“It is important that I state clearly that support for military forces or intelligence units which engaged in violent and widespread repression of the kind described in the (Truth Commission) report was wrong . . . The United States must not repeat that mistake” (117).

Plantamura asserts that even with the admission of “wrongful acts by the United States to the people of Guatemala, the American general public seems unaware of U.S. involvement in Guatemalan internal affairs” (117). In presenting Taylor as both naïve and ignorant of the pressing political issues of her day, Kingsolver’s is pushing for her own political agenda: the urgent need for awareness and action aimed at situations of injustice.

Taylor’s neighbour, Mrs. Parsons, acts to further Kingsolver’s point regarding an ignorant American view. In response to Estevan’s work at a Chinese restaurant where he describes the language barrier he faces with the owner who does not speak any English, Mrs. Parsons exclaims; “Before you know it the whole world will be here jibbering and jabbering till we won’t know it’s American. . . . They ought to stay put in their own dirt, not come here taking up jobs” (Kingsolver 143). When Taylor attempts to offer an apology towards Estevan for such nasty words that indirectly criticize his own existence as an immigrant, he responds calmly stating; “I understand . . . This is how Americans think. You believe that if something terrible
happens to someone, they must have deserved it” (157). Though Taylor does not exemplify the same mean spirit as her neighbour, she nonetheless has no knowledge of the atrocities that Esperanza and Estevan have experienced during their lifetimes.

Kingsolver uses the growing friendship between Taylor and Estevan as an opportunity to relay some of those atrocities and expose her reader to the injustice taking place in Guatemala. After Esperanza tries to kill herself, Estevan spends one evening with Taylor in which they enter into a conversation regarding the torture performed by Guatemala City police and the kidnapping of his and Esperanza’s daughter, Ismene: “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.” (180). To this description, he also adds, “The telephones are made in the United States” (180). With this subtle inclusion, Kingsolver is directly commenting on the involvement of the U.S. to support a regime that tortures its civilians. Taylor once again defends her ignorance: “You think . . . I just look the other way while the President or somebody sends down this and that, shiploads of telephones to torture people with. But nobody asked my permission” (181). In presenting Taylor in such a way, Kingsolver makes her an easily identifiable protagonist. Like most of the American public, she is uneducated and unaware of her own country’s political involvement in Guatemala and is uncomfortable hearing about it.

Estevan continues, explaining to Taylor the circumstances of the kidnapping of Ismene, which center on his and Esperanza’s knowledge of the names of union members, making the couple “more useful alive than dead” (184). Slowly, Taylor comes to terms with what Estevan has told her, though she experiences a type of shock at the reality of his situation: “You picked the lives of those seventeen people over getting your daughter back? Or at least a chance at getting her back? . . . I can’t even begin to think about a world where people have to make choices like that”
(184). To this, Estevan replies, “You live in that world” (184). This discussion proves instrumental to Taylor’s awareness of the harsh reality that surrounds her and has directly affected the people in her community. Furthermore, in developing the bond between protagonist Taylor and Estevan, Kingsolver is using the friendship between the two characters to draw out of her reader an empathy for the refugee couple, which she aims to be representative of all displaced and marginalized peoples, but especially those who have been affected as a direct result of U.S. foreign policy and imperialist Western rule.

Through Taylor’s growing friendships with Esperanza and Estevan she experiences a transformation from her ignorant worldview. In hearing their story of the loss of their daughter, Taylor is able to empathize with the couple as a result of her own relationship with Turtle, an abused and abandoned Cherokee child she has taken in and cared for as if she was her own daughter: “All of Esperanza’s hurts flamed up in my mind, a huge pile of burning things that the world just kept throwing more onto. Somewhere in that pile was a child that looked just like Turtle” (189). This new development in Taylor inspires her to risk her own life for her friends by driving them to a safe house in Oklahoma that is able to offer them more security than Mattie’s own sanctuary. At this, Mattie expresses fear for Taylor and for the consequences she will incur if she is caught helping Esperanza and Estevan: “She told me that if I got caught I could get five years in prison and a $2000 fine” (247), persisting that this wasn’t “just hypothetical . . . it actually happened before that people got caught” (247). This threat to Taylor and anyone else assisting people the U.S. government deemed illegal immigrants was a very real issue for those involved in the Sanctuary movement at the time, something Kingsolver highlights in her novel. In his essay discussing the various groups in the United States that offered aid to refugees from Central America between the years of 1973 and 1990, Svenja Blanke states that “Central
American civil war refugees arrived at a time in which the U.S. public attitude towards “immigration” was rather conservative and, concerning migration from Central America, disinterested” (235 Blanke). However, Blanke points out the people near the border in Arizona reacted with concerned interest and responded humanely by assisting undocumented migrants with food and shelter, initiating the movement that came to be known as the “Sanctuary movement” (235). While the government claimed the Guatemalan refugee’s motives for coming to the U.S. were economic, “the Sanctuary movement believed it was helping political and/or civil was refugees who were entitled to temporary asylum” (236). Kingsolver shows her support for those that took risks in order to help Guatemalan refugees and by writing about this specifically within The Bean Trees, she aims to affect the political opinions of her reader on the subject as well.

Furthermore, significant with regards to the geographic journey that Esperanza and Estevan have been forced to make seeking asylum from the violence in their homeland, and then their additional forced migration within the United States from Mattie’s in Arizona to the safe house in Oklahoma, is the mirroring of the Guatemalan couples displacement with the Cherokee people’s dispossession and removal from their homelands. Just as the United States imposed an imperialist Western attitude in the intervention of Guatemala, leading to civil war and mass genocide, the disregard for the sovereignty of the Cherokee nation by the U.S. government resulted in the death of thousands of Cherokee during their forced migration west from their established capital at New Echota, Georgia (Nonviolent Database). Walia demonstrates in “What is Border Imperialism?” that instances referenced within The Bean Trees regarding the Cherokee not as merely isolated incidents themselves but claims this “privatization” (47) of Indigenous lands as on-going by citing “colonial and capitalist interests” in the expropriation of Indigenous
lands, “dispossessing Indigenous nations of their territorial base and livelihood, particularly within but not limited to settler-colonial states” (47). Additionally, Kingsolver’s choice to include fictional characters like Esperanza and Estevan, as well as Turtle, who must all attempt to withstand imperialist U.S. practices that resulted in their dispossession of a homeland reflects Walia’s theory of border imperialism: “These instances highlight how mass displacements and precarious migrations are not random but rather largely a result of structural dictates. Within border imperialism, the dual process of displacement and migration are manufactured through the specific trajectories of colonialism and capitalism” (44). While it is not clear as to whether or not Taylor herself is aware of all of the implications and connections between both the displaced Guatemala refugees and Turtle’s own connection to the Cherokee people and their disenfranchised position at the hands of the U.S. government, her actions of empathy and her attempts to understand further as the novel and her relationship with all of them progresses display her shift away from an ignorant world view.

Kingsolver has stated that she is often asked as to whether or not “it’s really artistic to write novels that contain real issues” (Krumholz, Riley, and Torrens 98), to which she replies; “How could I not write about such things? I have to write about the world I live in, and this is what it looks like. I’ve never visited a world that was free of injustice and struggle” (98). Mirroring this statement, Kingsolver uses fictional characters and situations within her novel The Bean Trees to include her own critique and political agenda regarding the issues of her time, particularly issues of Western imperialism and unjust human rights practices, and to employ them to create in her reader empathy for all human beings and a thirst for truth and social justice.
**Bibliography**


LISE ROBINSON is currently enrolled in her final year of the Honors Specialization in English Language and Literature program at Huron University College. Her interests in the study of the English discipline are centered within the broad range of English theory surrounding issues of class, gender, race, sexuality and culture.