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AP English 12 – Per. 5

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The Poisonwood Bible – Feminism

The central Price family of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* is composed of five females to one male, and the heavily-contrasting personalities between all five women create prime material to analyze through a feminist lens. Taking place in the 1960s, the values of gender equality are heavily skewed towards the men, with the women taking on much more subservient roles. Nathan Price, the lone man in the family, holds dominance over his wife and four daughters and constantly belittles and thinks low of them in spite of his religious piety. The village of Kilanga in the African Congo, despite being considered backwards by the Prices at first, turns out to be much more accepting of females in larger roles of society, yet still keeps noticeable restrictions on their capabilities. The Price women themselves all vary and encompass a full range of personalities, from spoiled Rachel who embodies the worst traits associated with females, to curious Leah who strives to learn from the Kilangan culture and break through her social limitations. The inequality of women is a prominent secondary theme to the overlying one on cultural acceptance, and the Price girls offer plenty of insight into that message of the story.

Feminism is defined by its usage in order to “understand the nature of gender inequality” (Feminism Theory Notes). Within the Price family, the husband Nathan holds the most power, with his wife too meek and his daughters too fearful of punishment to speak out against them. Any actions by his children that are seen as wrong or rebellious are met with the Verse, a punishment that involves copying a verse from the Bible one-hundred times (59). When he is in

a foul mood, he speaks to his family with what they label a “dog peed on the carpet” voice (164), a slow, threatening tone used when speaking to dumb animals. Nathan views the women in his family as inferior in both morals and intelligence, showing a clear opinion of male superiority. However, Nathan’s views do not coincide with the message of the story, and Nathan is portrayed as a hypocritical, ugly man whose sexist values only serve to highlight his detestable nature. As the narrative is entirely from the girls’ point of view, they are cast into the role of protagonists, and Nathan’s demeaning, borderline abusive behavior comes off as antagonistic at best and downright villainous at worst. Nathan’s sexism is used to both highlight and subvert the gender inequality towards women by showing that such injustice exists, but is shameful and wrong at the same time.

Kilanga, even if only by the necessity of cooperation in a deadly, unforgiving jungle environment, allows women to hold more important roles than in America. Though they still occupy the same duties as child raisers and housekeepers, the Kilangan women are appreciated for their contributions and cared for just as well as the men of the village. Even here, however, there are roles that a female can never assume. When Leah wishes to participate as a hunter in the village hunt, defying generations of tradition where women were merely gatherers of the slain spoils, controversy is sparked within Kilanga as the village is torn between accepting her help and refusing due to her being a female (336). Even after allowing her to participate, discrimination is still shown through the chief’s son Gbenye’s dismissal of Leah’s skills and Nelson, Leah’s friend and supporter, insulting Gbenye’s own hunting skills in turn by “calling him *nkento*, a woman (349).” Such an action shows that Nelson only supports Leah because she is his friend, and not because he himself believes that women can be hunters like men. In this traditional culture, females are still barred from participating in the same activities as males,

restricted to the role of gatherer rather than hunter and child bearer rather than leader. The situation in Kilanga highlights both gender differences between the duties of men and women and the oppression of women, two of the four main types of feminist theory (Crossman), though the view of oppression is somewhat mitigated by the fact that only Leah, the intelligent and outgoing outsider, is actually bothered by her limitations.

While Leah could be considered the strongest woman out of the five Price females, the other four are varied in how much they adhere to the feminine stereotype of the 1960s. Orleanna, the girls' mother, is a typical housewife of the time, submissive to her husband despite being aware that he is no longer the man she fell in love with (196) and dedicated to her family and all the grief it brings. Rachel, on the other hand, embodies the worst traits associated with women, being vain and spoiled, and growing up to be a rich widow with a long history of husbands that were never good enough for her (460). Adah and Ruth May's genders do not contribute to their identities as much as their mother and older siblings, being more defined by them being an outcast but genius cripple and an innocent child, respectively. Leah, however, is the Price female who most directly falls under the ideals of the feminist theory. The feminist theory places its value in the "recognition of women's oppression" and "commitment to ending the unjust subordination (Plunkett)," and Leah, unwilling to remain in a role where she feels useless and inadequate, works towards her goal by integrating herself into formerly male-only roles, like hunting. The Price women are all used to demonstrate instances of gender inequality and stereotyping, but Leah is the only one who is used to overcome this oppression.

Though *The Poisonwood Bible's* main theme is on learning to accept the differences between cultures, the clear messages on the equality of men and women cannot be ignored. Nathan's sexist views and Kilanga's traditional restrictions on women are both portrayed as

unfair and unjustified, and Leah, who strives to break free from the oppressive confines of society, is shown to be the closest character to a “hero” in the story. The underlying message is that women can be equal to men, and that gender does not determine one’s moral standing. Kingsolver’s story may have been written to give insight into the vastly different culture of the African Congo, but the main characters are all female for a reason, and that reason is to show the bias and opposition they would not have faced as males and to show how they all overcome that opposition in their own ways.

Works Cited

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