

Environmental Discrimination and Violence: A Discourse in Search of Environmental Justice in *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens

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Abstract

Environmental Justice or Ecojustice advocates to sensitize the human kind of a sense of environmentally powered equity, acknowledgement and fairness in treatment of humans as well as non-human kind whether flora, fauna or physical environment. Ecojustice understands the importance of a continued co-existence of every natural species on earth and therefore finds the plight of non-human kind as an echo of poorly served conduct, primarily by affluent people. This paper aims to deliver an analysis of the popular text *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens in alignment with violent disturbances caused to physical environment based on a normalized conception of solely gazing at nature from a patronizing and discriminating vantage. The seventeen principles of ecojustice adopted during the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit intends to mitigate an urgency of acknowledging and improving the environmental plight of actively and passively oppressed communities of people along with problems faced by the physical environment. The marshes and Kya in *Where the Crawdads Sing* are easily identified as the face of oppressed kind and Kya's experiences and voice in the text merges the message of environmentally discriminated people as well as that of the physical environment. Inequality of treatment, condescending and oppressive gaze, abandonment, mistreatment, violence, sense of entitlement and judgement therefore are some of the environmental plights in the text which the paper aims to problematize.

Keywords : Environment, Justice, Judgement, Oppression, Oppressive gaze, Violence, Discrimination, co-existence

Introduction

The post-modern 21st century has witnessed exponentially in its nascent years an impactful influence of environmentally challenged discourses. Environmentalism is not a new philosophy or approach to enlightenment; nature has been praised and worshipped in ancient texts and the wisdom of living closely in cooperation with the

physical environment is shared in ancient practices. Romanticism during the late 18th century and initial 19th century marks the phase of celebrating nature and promoting the status and importance of nature for internal and external sustenance and American Transcendentalism and Nature Writing has given nature a profound position of being a presence that is not only significant on the outside but one that

creates a deeper impact internally. They imparted a close living with nature and found its influence in that proximity of closeness. By the late 20th century, many ecologically challenged writers and thinkers contributed works reflecting the risky conditions that man had caused to the environment. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 unearthed the danger of excessive usage of DDT in the environment without understanding its hazardous impact. One of the reasons for the outburst of environmentally charged debates and discourses in the 20th century is the impact of the Industrial Revolution and the two World Wars which had disastrous impact on the earth in totality. In recent years environmental philosophy, environmental history, ecocriticism, environmental anthropology, environmental justice etc., have been investing much in positioning the problematics of the environment in the map of academic and critical discourse without formal support. Whereas ecocriticism was formally constituted under the wings of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, many lacked such a formal body of study. By the early 21st century Environmental Humanities was formed and accepted in academia to stand as the formal discipline that powers all the aforementioned branches of study. According to Prof. Dr. Schmidt et al. of the University of Augsburg, the first European MA course for EH was launched at Bath Spa University, United Kingdom, in 2016 to bring "humanities and sciences together to build creative responses to environmental challenges." (Prof. Dr. Schmidt et al. 225) and two of the pioneering journals are of Environmental Humanities are *Environmental Humanities* and *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*.

Environmentally powered discourses come in various forms and perspectives, among the

many lenses Ecojustice holds an impactful place as it brings forth socially fueled environmental problems as well as environmentally fueled social problems often dumped upon minorities or racially isolated communities. Ecojustice in academic discourse is powered by the body of Environmental Humanities. It acknowledges the entitlement of existence both for humans as well as the non-human strings of the ecosystem. Ecological justice identifies the ecosystem as a separate entity, capable of functioning independently. Thus, unfair treatment of nature through economically charged human interventions like pollution-inducing industries, factories, encroachments, and extractions are checked and challenged by it. While ecojustice is a broader dome of challenging and battling the plight of ecology, environmental justice is another name which is synonymously articulated as ecojustice. However, the term environment encompasses everything that physically as well as abstractly surrounds and influences the earth and therefore environmental justice although following ecojustice, not just finds the plight of non-human kind but also voices for the environmental adversities of the human kind. Known as the "father of Environmental Justice" Dr. Robert D. Bullard, initiated Environmental Justice against environmental racism when he contributed much support to the *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management, Inc.* lawsuit which was filed by "Black residents in Huston, Texas" (Young, np) against waste disposal management. Environmental Justice centrally stands against discrimination-borne mismanagement, violence, misjudgment, unfair treatment, bias and oppression of minority communities relating to environmental matters. It opposes the laid-back, unethical and patronising attitude of finding certain communities of people as easy targets to throw garbage at, building factories far away from the city yet near residents

of a distant locality or neighbourhood and gazing with contempt at the same people as residents of unhygienic spots.

Environmental Justice at its core involves environmental law and Human Rights as it stands for justice against environmental injustice caused to the environment and a certain community of its residents who occupy the lower position of socio-political strata. It also tends to attain an extreme political status with governmental policies and public protests for change. This paper, however, is an attempt to focus on the pulse of environmental injustice such as discrimination of the easily dismissible or the minority, violence, oppression and a sense of entitlement of the “haves” against “have nots” and the judgmental or censorious attitude of the urbane people against the marsh and Kya, the central character in the text. The heart of this discourse is evaluating the problems of discriminatory gaze, preconceived judgement and vilification of a certain category or section of people or land by those who are socially and politically positioned, privileged and economically fit for the urban culture.

Environmental Justice or ecojustice advocates to sensitise humans’ kind of a sense of environmentally powered equity, acknowledgement and fairness in the treatment of humans as well as non-human kind whether flora, fauna or physical environment. Ecojustice understands the importance of a continued co-existence of every natural species on earth and therefore finds the environmentally stimulated plight of humans and non-humankind as an echo of poorly served conduct, primarily by affluent people. This paper thus aims to deliver an analysis of the popular text *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens in alignment with violent disturbances caused to the physical environment

and its residents based on a normalised conception of solely gazing at nature from a patronising and discriminating vantage. The marshes and Kya in *Where the Crawdads Sing* are easily identified as the face of an oppressed kind and Kya’s experiences and voice in the text merges the message of environmentally discriminated people as well as that of the physical environment. Inequality of treatment, condescending and oppressive gaze, abandonment, mistreatment, violence, sense of entitlement and judgement therefore are some of the environmental plights in the text which the paper aims to problematise. The seventeen principles of ecojustice adopted during the First National People of Colour Environmental Leadership Summit intend to mitigate an urgency of acknowledging and improving the environmental plight of actively and passively oppressed communities of people along with problems faced by the physical environment. The intent of this paper is thus, to identify some of the seventeen principles of ecojustice and examine their relevance to the primary text which is a popular narrative also developed into a motion picture in 2022.

Environmental Justice propagated by Bullard intends to sensitise the world about the discrimination and oppressive treatment against people of colour concerning environmental problems. Robert D. Bullard states about the 1979 “*Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management, Inc.*” lawsuit that,

From the early 1920s through 1978, more than 80 per cent of Houston’s garbage landfills and incinerators were located in mostly Black neighbourhoods — even though Blacks made up only 25 per cent of the city’s population. The residents were not able to halt the landfill, but they were able to impact the city and state waste facility siting regulations. (Bullard, np).

This lawsuit stands as the first of its kind that fought environmental discrimination which according to Bullard enabled people to put “environmental racism on the map”, it fuelled the organisation of the “First National People of Colour Environmental Leadership Summit on October 24-27, 1991, in Washington DC” where the seventeen principles of environmental justice were adopted to redefine the concept of the environment as inclusive of every kind, race, colour and class of people along with the plants and animals of the earth. Mentioned below are the seventeen principles of Environmental Justice:

1. Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.
2. Environmental Justice demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all people, free from any form of discrimination or bias.
3. Environmental Justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.
4. Environmental Justice calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.
5. Environmental Justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.
6. Environmental Justice demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and containment at the point of production.
7. Environmental Justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.
8. Environmental Justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.
9. Environmental Justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.
10. Environmental Justice considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.
11. Environmental Justice must recognise a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and covenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination.
12. Environmental Justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honouring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources.
13. Environmental Justice calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent and a halt to the testing of experimental

reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of colour.

14. Environmental Justice opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.
15. Environmental Justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.
16. Environmental Justice calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasises social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.
17. Environmental Justice requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritise our lifestyles to ensure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.

These principles are active and has worked for the welfare, protection and to serve justice to many communities of people against various act of environmental discrimination and injustice. Keeping the limitations of this paper such as the parameters of the plot in the primary text and the handful yet distinctive environmental arguments it highlights, the paper shall inspect the text through the stance of the first two principles of Environmental Justice.

Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing*

Where the Crawdads Sing is Delia Owens' debut novel. The author is an active zoologist and a conservationist and is said to have co-authored "three internationally bestselling nonfiction

books". The book was listed as a Sunday Times bestseller and New York Times best seller in the years 2018 and 2019 and was recently produced as a popular movie in 2022 by actor Reese Witherspoon and Lauren Neustadter. *Where the Crawdads Sing* paints a gripping narrative about Catherine Daniella Clark who is also known as Kya. The tale also fits into the genre of bildungsroman as the plot traces her growth from a young age till she is laid to rest eternally. Kya grows up learning to face and get through tough circumstances of life such as witnessing her abusive father lashing out his aggression at her mother and surviving alone after everyone abandons her in the shack. However, the toughest challenge for Kya which also left a lifelong impression on her was to see her mother leave her behind and fly away out of their troublesome nest without turning back. Thus, Kya's character development begins at a very nascent age making her experiences as well as the journey of the readers through it indispensable.

Growing up in the marshes, Kya is known by the people of Barkley Cove as the "marsh girl". She could not spend a day in school because of the way she was looked at and gazed at by her classmates. Fitting into the standards of the town's way of life was another challenge therefore maturity sets in at a very young age for Kya as she begins to figure out life on her own. Her meeting and development of an organic bond with Tate brings her a sense of security after several experiences of abandonment by her family. For the first time she feels like she can trust someone other than herself, which is why when Tate does not keep his promise to return on the 4th of July, the severity of feeling abandoned is more than before. Intervention of people from the urban locality in Kya's life and marshes always ended unfavourably and Kya found herself betrayed and beaten. Among

all kinds of intervention Chase Andrews' proves to be the most fatal and violent and when Chase is found dead in the swamp, Kya is immediately arrested under suspicion of being involved in the sudden death of the "star quarterback and town hot shot" Chase Andrews (Owens, 24).

Enquiring the "sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction" in *Where the Crawdads Sing*.

The first principle of Environmental Justice establishes nature as a sacred, divine and nurturing realm by personifying it as "Mother Earth". The physical environment of the earth therefore is believed to be alive and constantly in a state of process and progress bringing forth evolutionary changes which according to Aldo Leopold, "the father of wildlife ecology" is often interfered with by "Man's invention of tools" that "has enabled him to make changes of unprecedented violence, rapidity, and scope." (Leopold, 217). "The sacredness of Mother Earth" significantly endows nature with nurturing and protecting quality which also provides and feeds its children (both living and non-living) with resources. The quality of sacredness on the other hand positions nature as an entity that is sanctified and revered. Sanctity and reverence come from being pure, fair, impartial in treatment and absence of malice which is a godly quality; therefore, "the sacredness of Mother Earth" endows nature as an entity that can separately function on its own.

Nature in the text is represented through the presence of marshes. The central action of the text takes place in the marsh such as Kya's wretched childhood experiences. She experiences abandonment from an early age when her mother and everyone else leave her never to return, one after the other her brothers and sisters leave her

and finally her father stops coming back home. Surrounded by such incomprehensible experiences for a young girl, the marsh becomes Kya's shelter and the birds her companion. She celebrates her birthday with seagulls, which is a representation of innocent companionship between Kya and nature. Delia Owens also easily and sharply states in the text that Kya's sorrow remained but they were settled after a while in the deepest bottom of her heart and whenever she sought comfort, she "laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her home." (Owens, 34).

Marsh as sketched by the author is a place that sheltered many castaways, runaway slaves and robbers. It was not a place favoured by people who were in search of "serious land" meaning economically prosperous. The place had a rough identity of its own, ironically carved by human interference yet it was bountiful as Owens mentions, "A man who didn't mind scrabbling for supper would never starve" in the marshes (8). Kya's sustenance was easy because she made an effort to "scrabble" for mussels and oysters to be sold at Jumpin's store. She earned money for her basic requirements and bought them even though her childish spirit tempted her to buy candy. Lines such as, "It took all her might not to buy a Sugar Daddy instead of a candle" and, "Buying her gas and groceries surely made her a grown-up." (76) significantly emphasise the dawn of Kya's maturity at an early stage of life. The marsh taught her life skills, survival skills and living independently just as it was. The "sacredness of Mother Earth" is thus observed in the marsh which protects, provides and nurtures Kya and "Ecological unity" is found in Kya's submission, acceptance and communion with the terrain of the marsh. Kya represents the being whether human or non-human who harbours only existence and survival without jeopardizing

others who are existing side by side with her.

The “interdependence of all species” is a simple and basic knowledge that holds a deep wisdom of earth’s sustenance. It is scientifically known that every species of living as well as non-living matter on earth is dependent on each other co-operating intricately, which Aldo Leopold affirms that ecologist calls “the symbiosis” (Leopold, 202). A harmonious interdependence of species is observed in the text between Kya and the great outdoor marsh. She not only desires to live under the protective shade of the marshes but expresses a keen desire to record and learn about it, therefore when Chase enquired what she would do with her “journal or collected specimens” of feathers, shells, flowers and grasses she expresses, “I am keeping records so I can learn about the marsh.” (177). Owens mentions that while many from the town including Chase saw the marsh for its economic purpose such as fishing and farming, Kya saw and interacted with it as if it was alive, as if it was a constant companion (176).

Another instance of interdependence is observed between Kya, Jumpin and his wife, and Tate and her attorney Tom Milton. These characters in the text are people whose life and endeavours are simple and far from complication, they live by hardly interfering and impacting others adversely. These characters in the text have only shown cooperation and communication for the benefit of each other. While Jumpin is the first person to help Kya earn money by buying her mussels and oysters, Tate helps her to learn reading and writing and find a genuine company of friendship in him. However, attorney Milton could not be on the same page as the people of Barkley Clove to accuse Kya of murdering Chase Andrews because she lived in the marshes and they had an affair before Chase was married. Other than the marshes, Kya’s space of

security is at Jumpin’s shop among the owners and with Tate. Interdependency of species according to the principle of environmental justice strongly directs towards ecological units, however, the text delivers these units in the form of characters. These characters are also a part of the ecosystem and the biotic symbiosis in nature and therefore, their interdependency as found in the plot stands legit. Their interaction and communion with each other establish a harmonious bond which also contribute to the well-being of the environment they share.

The principle of Environmental Justice also advocates the right to be free from ecological destruction for every species or unit of an ecosystem which includes living and non-living or the human and non-human kind. The right to be free from ecological destruction or to benefit from environmental laws is a problematic stance in the text. Kya is threatened as she is slyly pursued by Chase Andrews to quench his lust. He manipulates and makes her believe in the illusion of a pleasant future together and later Chase hunts her as a predator hunting his prey when she denies his access and approach towards her. Chase Andrews to Kya represents what government or the law often promises to the people but is left unfulfilled. Chase promises Kya a healthy future together, a home and a family to which Kya succumbs and completely submits herself to him as they intimately spend a night at a cheap hotel. Often rehabilitation cases of road construction, dam buildings, deforestation etc., reflect what Kya experienced i.e., a faulty promise hoping that people submit their properties only to obtain a half-baked compensation. Kya witnessed much violence when she was a child, much abuse that distanced her from her “ma”. She lost everything to the flaming temperament of her father and Chase Andrews expressed signs of bringing her back the same intensive clouds of fear

and violence. Her destruction was inevitable at the hands of an egoistic man such as Chase Andrews. However, Kya was the marsh girl, the daughter of the marsh and she knew the routine ways of the swamp and marsh that it “absorbed” everything “silently” and deaths were never a “tragedy, certainly not a sin” to the swamp (1). Kya knew the fear of being a prey but she grew up learning to free herself from being it, therefore when Chase wanted to violate her, she acted like the firefly which lures its mate to be beheaded after their mating ritual. The right to be free from ecological destruction paves the way for the right to live without fear of violence, in peace and harmony. There have been many accounts in the past as well as present of ecological destructions in the form of pollution, exhaustion of resources, unchecked encroachments and poaching, endangering wild plants, animals and birds, negligence of indigenous and economically deficient people and depriving them of environmental rights and privileges. According to the reports of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 420 million hectares of forest have been lost since 1990. CNN reports that 852 fin whales were slaughtered in Iceland from 2006 to 2018, Robert Bullard initiated Environmental Justice because “Houston’s garbage landfill and incinerators were located in the black neighbourhood” which suggested negligence and environmental discrimination of certain communities of people based on race and colour. These ecological destructions share a parallel endeavour with Kya’s experience as a target of violence and oppression.

An Examination of “Mutual Respect”, “Justice for all People” and “Free from any form of discrimination or bias” in *Where the Crawdads Sing*.

Kya, the Jumpins and the marsh represent

the socially dejected and excluded kinds. Their exclusion and discrimination stems from their identity of place and race. The marsh is deemed as dangerous, dark and wild, where menacing and vicious secrets are hidden. Therefore, Kya’s self upbringing in the marshes deems her equally dangerous as the marsh. She is known as the “marsh girl” or “marsh trash” and “swamp trash”, whereas her name is Catherine Daniella Clark which no one bothered to address. Labelling her as the “marsh girl” directs every gaze upon her when she walks out from her cabin to the town. From a psychological perspective, labelling someone positively or negatively impacts the nature and character of the person. Positive labels encourage and motivate the person to do well, whereas negative labels are signs of insults, mockery and discouragement. The label consciously or unconsciously makes others develop a preconceived idea about the person. Kya’s label by the people of Barkley Clove as “the marsh girl” constructs a biased and judgemental contention about her. Therefore, when the Methodist preacher’s wife Mrs. Teressa White saw her daughter talking to Kya at Jumpin’s store she immediately held her away warning her not to go near Kya as she was “dirty”. Mrs. Teressa also shares her disgust against Kya and people from the marsh with another woman saying,

I wish those people wouldn’t come to town. Look at her. Filth. Plumb nasty. There is that stomach flu goin’ around and I just know for a fact it came in with them. Last year they brought in that case of measles, and that’s serious. (66)

Mutual respect, justice and freedom from discrimination or bias is the central objective of the second principle of Environmental Justice. The advocacy of these aforementioned matters arises from the presence of discrimination and

biased attitudes and the absence of mutual respect and justice in environmental matters. Kya being a victim of prejudice and discrimination from the people of Barkley Clove is marked in the instance when people thought that it would not make any difference to her whether she attended school or not. “What difference would it make to marsh people who’d do a few months of school, maybe, then never be seen again.” (28). Children in the school ignored her, “But they, like everyone else ignored her” (29) and she decides never to go to school and embarrass herself again. Shops and gas station keepers chase her away even though she has money to purchase supplies, Mr. Johnny Lane who “referred to her family as swamp trash” (46) chased her away calling her “swamp rat”.

Apart from Kya, Jumpin is also a victim of prejudice, discrimination and insults since he belongs to the black community. Barkley Clove knew how to separate what they considered acceptable and discardable as the town is described to have separate churches and schools for the black community and the white community. Kids teased Jumpin saying, “Aren’t we lucky. Here comes a nigger walkin’ to nigger town” while, “one of the boys reached down, picked up a stone, and slung it at Jumpin’s back” (101) but retaliation or teaching the boys a lesson on manners was a matter handled best only if one stood in equity of class, race and colour. Jumpin owned no equity with the boys so he never reacted or retaliated.

The court scene in the text is another intriguing deliberation carefully knitted by the author. The court scene becomes a ground of debate and discourse to deliver justice. Often packed with few people to none, the court gets flooded with citizens of Barkley Clove because the sensational case involved “the marsh girl” who they believed to be “part wolf”, “or the missing link between ape

and man” (340). Kya is arrested and prosecuted for the murder of Chase Andrews and the jury who must decide her case after careful deliberation is packed with people who have always gazed and saw her as the “marsh trash”, “marsh girl” and “swamp rat”. For the aforementioned reason of prejudice, Kya’s attorney Mr. Milton pleads to move the case to another town but the plea is denied. Mr. Milton fears the possibility of biased judgment that may arise in the court because of the preconceived idea about Kya that she came from the wild marsh. However, when the prosecutor could not prove and provide any evidence that could determine Kya’s involvement in the death of Chase Andrews, Mr. Milton questioned the jury and the audience if they excluded Miss Clark because she was different, or whether she was different because they excluded her. He affirms that all of them have called her the “Marsh Girl” but “scientific institutions recognise her as the Marsh expert” and concludes by stating that, “it is time, at last, for us to be fair to the Marsh Girl.” (341) Deliverance of justice in the text concerns with the cleansing of prejudice, discrimination and oppression of nature in any shape, size, colour or kind rather than whether Kya murdered Chase or not. It is a display of a courtroom debate to bring the oppressed and the oppressor under one roof and deliberate on whether the oppression and the entitlement and feeling prepotent upon the ecological or natural units such as indigenous people, economically needy people, the forest and its wild inhabitants is reasonable at all.

Conclusion

Kya represents the marsh, the birds, the people, and the animals who are targets of environmental discrimination, easy picks to be blamed and bullied because they belong to a place which is labelled as wild and dangerous.

The marsh simply exists as a part of the larger geography, providing habitats for seagulls and other birds, fishes, crawdads and many other aquatic animals. Being known as dangerous and threatening stems from people's fear of the unknown, therefore both Kya and the marsh are equally subjected to prejudice and discrimination from the people of Barkly Clove. Kya's statement to Jodie, "I never hated people. They hated me. They laughed at me. They left me. They harassed me. They attacked me." (350) is a testament and a voice of every victim both human and non-human

who experienced environmental injustice such as violence, abandonment, discrimination, exclusion and prejudice. Delia Owen's text distinctly marks the discourse of environmental injustice through her characters and the rich landscape of swamps and marshes to which Reese Witherspoon and Lauren Neustadter's popular movie impartially breathes life. Popular texts such as *Where the Crawdads Sing* are vessels that transmit ecologically powered disquisitions, texts as this delivers ecological consciousness among readers and viewers which is often the significant step to instate environmental change.

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