

The sanctuary movement in "the bean trees" essay



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" I didn't want to believe the world could be so unjust. But, of course, it was right there in front of my nose" (214). These words were the response of Taylor Greer, the central character of the novel *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver, when confronted with the plight of Central American refugees in the United States. The political concern occupies one of the primary niches in Kingsolver's books, among other important themes that she touches upon in her writing (DeMarr 19). *The Bean Trees*, in particular, deals with the illegal status of the Guatemalan refugees in the United States in the 1980s. In this paper, we will provide the analysis and evaluation of how realistically the author depicted the Sanctuary Movement in the 1970s and 1980s.

As Barbara Kingsolver said in one of her essays, "[w]hat seems right to me... is to represent the world I can see and touch as honestly as I know how, and...to use that variegated world as a matrix for the characters and conflicts I need to fathom" (qtd. in DeMarr 20). In the novel, the characters through which Kingsolver represented the world she wanted to observe, namely the plight of refugees, are Estevan and Esperanza, the couple from Guatemala who seek refuge in the US. When Taylor was first introduced to them, she was not fully aware of the difficulty of their situation. She was just a girl from rural Kentucky, neither educated enough nor well-off to engage herself in politics. However, with the development of the plot, as she comes to know Estevan and Esperanza better and learn about their tormented past and their status in the US, Taylor's awareness becomes so acute that she volunteers to help, even at the cost of her own wellbeing.

While Estevan and Esperanza, who are actually Mayan people, represent illegal immigrants in the novel, Taylor's friend Mattie is the character that

represents political activism and, thereby, greatly affects Taylor's political concerns as well. Apart from running an auto repair shop in Tucson, Arizona, Mattie runs a sanctuary for illegal refugees where they stay until transportation to safer shelters, further from the Mexican border. It is Mattie's involvement in the illegal activities that Taylor first learns about from the TV news, as Mattie is being interviewed and commenting on two illegal refugees' return to El Salvador. Mattie's concern about those refugees, being taken to custody and later found dead, was presented skeptically by the reporters. Mattie also reveals the truth about torture methods used by the Guatemalan police for the persecuted people: "A lot of them get here with burns...Cigarette burns...On their backs" (Kingsolver 160). After a while, Taylor learns from Estevan about the use of electricity for interrogation and the loss of his and Esperanza's daughter, who was kidnapped by the Guatemalan police, to make her parents deliver up seventeen political activists (Kingsolver 180, 183).

According to Ana Patricia Rodriguez, an expert in Central American literature and history, "[a]t the height of the repression, the Guatemalan government, in collusion with the country's military forces, intensified the violence through the work of paramilitary groups, death squads, Civilian Self-Defense Patrols, and other mechanisms of war that relentlessly made Maya people their prime target" (107). Rodriguez also cites the sources that report the killing and disappearance of over 150, 000 people, the destruction of over 400 villages, the internal displacement of over one million people, and the forced exile of almost 500, 000 people in the 1980s (107). In addition to people being killed, disappeared, displaced, tortured, raped, and grievously injured,

violations of human rights included the damage to basic means of survival and the symbols of Mayan life (107). Virginia M. Bouvier, the researcher of human rights in Latin America, refers to the "reports on the violence, devastation, and abuses occurring throughout Central America" from the 1970s (127). According to her, the rates of human rights abuses in many Latin American nations increased during the 1970s and 1980s, and that "military governments were persistently repressive and often carried out indiscriminate anti-subversion campaigns" (128). Considering the above, it becomes clear that Barbara Kingsolver did not overrate the gravity of being detected in the novel.

Another issue that is worth mentioning is what motivated many people in the US to risk and provide shelter for illegal refugees in the 1970s and 1980s. In other words, what was the reason for the rise of the US-Central American Sanctuary Movement? Throughout the novel, there is evident condemnation of the actions of the Guatemalan and the US governments because Estevan, Mattie, and Taylor express their thoughts about the impact of governments on ordinary people. Mattie strongly believed that it was a legal obligation to take in people whose lives were in danger. She said that only one half of one percent out of thousands Guatemalans and Salvadorans, who had applied for asylum, had been actually granted it, and that half of one percent were dictators' relatives rather than the persecuted people (Kingsolver 139). "In Guatemala, you are careful. If you want to change something, you can find yourself dead", Estevan explained to Taylor (183). When Mattie expressed concern about immigration, making noises, which would cause the possibility of Estevan and Esperanza's arrest and deportation in the twinkling of an eye,

Taylor was filled with genuine indignation: " That just can't be right...that they would do that to a person, knowing they'd be killed" (213-214).

As Virginia M. Bouvier reports, the rise of Sanctuary Movement in the US was the response to executive policies of the Reagan administration to the Central American countries (128). The policies included the heightening of the US military aid to Central America, resulting in many civilians' escape from violence at home in order to seek sanctuary abroad. The help was not limited to providing shelters. Church-based groups assisted the refugees to cross the border undetected, search for employment, and frustrate deportation proceedings initiated by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (128). Ana Patricia Rodriguez also confirms the discontent of the US population with the US military and economic aid to Central American dictatorship. She points out that the intention of Sanctuary Movement was to bring the US military intervention in Central America to public attention (131). The partnership of individuals and religious entities was formed. Some members of the partnership declared their sanctuary status, aiding refugees in their border crossings, transporting them to safe houses throughout the US, and even posting bail for the arrested immigrants. As Sanctuary workers sought to end the human oppression by the US-sponsored war of Central America, they represented refugees in the legal system, thereby growing into a political movement that challenged the US legal system. Rodriguez mentions the arrests of Sanctuary workers in Texas and Arizona in 1984 and 1985. These arrests brought greater exposure to Central American refugees and the wars they were fleeing (131-132). All the above confirms the readiness with which such characters as Mattie, Taylor, and the members of

the church group in Oklahoma, where Estevan and Esperanza found sanctuary after being transported from that of Mattie's, put their lives at risk, not to mention other people whose help is implied in the novel.

Beyond all doubt, it is also no coincidence that Kingsolver chose Tucson in Arizona to be the city where Taylor learns about Sanctuary Movement. Indeed, Rodriguez states that it was originally a desire of the Tucsonian, Jim Corbett, to assist Central Americans crossing the Arizona border that quickly expanded throughout the US (131). According to a human rights activist Gary MacEoin (1909-2003), it was in Tucson that " a project...to develop a theology of the border in the light of the Sanctuary experience" was started (" Sanctuary Movement Lives on in New Interest"). The news for the 8th of May 1986 in Chicago Tribune and the 27th of October 1987 in The New York Times report the proceedings taking place in Tucson and relating to the violation of the immigration laws. From the articles, it is evident that Sanctuary Movement in Tucson was particularly active (" Sanctuary and Civil Disobedience"; Applebome " In Sanctuary Movement"). Finally, Bouvier mentions Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson that was declared a sanctuary for Central Americans by political activists (128).

Therefore, on the basis of the analysis provided above, we can rightfully assert that the depiction of the Sanctuary Movement of the 1970s and 1980s by Barbara Kingsolver was very realistic and, hence, trustworthy in terms of the author's perception of causes and effects of the US role in the Civil War in Guatemala. Her great attention to detail, as well as to the internal motives of ordinary people, makes her novel a reliable source in order to attract one's attention to the issues that are significant, topical, and controversial.

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