

The Bonds We Share: The Discourse of Family and Marriage in Barbara Kingsolver's Selected Stories

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ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengkaji nilai dan wacana keluarga serta pernikahan dalam *Homeland and Other Stories* karya Barbara Kingsolver melalui analisis wacana pada lima cerita: "Homeland," "Blueprint," "Covered Bridges," "Quality Time," dan "Stone Dreams." Hasil penelitian menunjukkan keberagaman tipe keluarga : extended, cohabiting, single-parent, childfree, dan disfungsional dengan tema identitas, rasa memiliki, dan adaptasi. Karakter Kingsolver merefleksikan pandangan tradisional dan modern yang dipengaruhi faktor pribadi, budaya, serta sosial. Studi ini merekomendasikan penelitian lanjutan dan penerapan edukatif.

Kata Kunci: Barbara Kingsolver, family values, marriage, discourse analysis, short stories.

INTRODUCTION

In today's language classrooms, Today, teachers use stories and books in language classes to help students learn language and understand cultures (Mitsigkas, 2015). Mitsigkas says using novels and short stories helps students get better at language and learn about other cultures (Mitsigkas, 2015). Stories give students real examples with new words and grammar. Reading stories helps students see how people talk in real life, so they get better at language and learn to understand others (Mitsigkas, 2015). Mitsigkas also says stories make students want to learn more, use their imagination, and feel connected to what they learn, making class fun and important (Mitsigkas, 2015).

Teachers use stories in class not just to read, but to help students think about what they read (Mitsigkas, 2015). Stories help students be creative, see different ideas, and talk about important things. Using stories in language lessons helps students learn to think carefully, talk well, and understand other cultures (Mitsigkas, 2020). One good way is called discourse analysis. It helps teachers and students see how language makes meaning in social and cultural situations (Gee, 2011). Discourse analysis looks at how words and talks are put together to make sense, thinking about the people and setting (Canning & Walker, 2024). Using discourse analysis, teachers help students find deeper messages in stories, making learning language fun and useful (Gee, 2011; Mitsigkas, 2020).

Many studies have looked at Barbara Kingsolver's work from different views like nature, feminism, and culture (Dickson, 2017; Hu & Wang, 2025; Kanthi & Vidhya, 2021; Meillon, 2016; Rao, 2019; Rao & Yadav, 2019; Rini & Wulandari, 2021; Robinson, 2016; Vellingiri, 2024). But most talk about nature or culture and only a few mention family or marriage a little. There is not much research that studies how Kingsolver's *Homeland* and *Other Stories* shows different kinds of families and marriages. So, a study about family and marriage in *Homeland* and *Other Stories* is needed to fill this gap and give a new idea about her work.

Ceri Gorton studies Barbara Kingsolver's stories as political and cultural works, focusing on big ideas like identity and activism (Gorton, 2009). But she doesn't look closely at how family and marriage are shown. She talks about things like Native American culture in "*Homeland*," but not about different kinds of families like big families, couples living together, single parents, couples without kids, or families with problems. Since family and close relationships are very important in Kingsolver's work, this study builds on Gorton's by using language and storytelling to explore how Kingsolver shows ideas about family and marriage. Using ideas from language studies and family sociology, this research fills the gap and looks closely at how Kingsolver's characters use words and stories to change ideas about family and marriage.

Kingsolver is called a "cultural cartographer" because her work honestly and kindly shows how American life is changing (Shaffer, 2018). She often writes about protecting the environment and social justice, exploring what it means to be human in a changing world (Leon, 2022). In *Homeland* and *Other Stories*, she focuses on family life, using families to show bigger social issues. Kingsolver's characters struggle with tradition, change, and finding where they belong, helping readers see their own lives in the stories.

To capture the richness of Kingsolver's vision, this study focuses on five short stories: "*Homeland*," "*Blueprint*," "*Covered Bridges*," "*Quality Time*," and "*Stone*

Dreams.” Each story provides a unique perspective on the complexities of family and marriage. Instead of idealized portraits, Kingsolver presents nuanced, sometimes messy realities-depicting love, obligation, and identity as they play out against the backdrop of evolving social norms.

The story “Homeland” explores the strength and resilience of a Cherokee family as they face displacement and work to preserve their culture (Otto et al., 1996). Kingsolver shows how family can carry heritage and provide support during difficult times. In contrast, “Blueprint” looks at modern marriage, highlighting the challenges of balancing work, family, and personal happiness (Alexandra Beauregard, 2007). It reveals the compromises couples make and questions the idea of “having it all.” “Covered Bridges” uses the image of an old bridge to show how memory and family ties shape our lives, emphasizing the lasting bonds that connect us to our past and community. “Quality Time” offers a realistic view of single motherhood, focusing on the strength and love needed to raise children alone (Kislev, 2019). Finally, “Stone Dreams” takes readers to the American Southwest, where themes of identity, belonging, and caring for the environment come together, showing how family, culture, and nature are deeply linked (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020).

To move from literary appreciation to academic analysis, this research employs discourse analysis, a method of which examines how language shapes our understanding of reality. As James Paul Gee argues, language is not just a tool for communication but a force that constructs identities and social relationships (Gee, 2011). By analyzing how Kingsolver’s characters talk, interact, and narrate their experiences, we can uncover the deeper cultural narratives at work in her stories.

Building on the insights of Neophytos Mitsigkas, literature especially short stories provides rich opportunities for students to develop both language skills and cultural understanding in the classroom (Mitsigkas, 2015). Julia Kristeva’s concepts of intertextuality and suprasegmental analysis remind us that texts are not isolated, but are influenced by a broader web of cultural and historical connections; by paying attention to elements like tone and rhythm, we can better appreciate the emotional and contextual depth in Kingsolver’s stories (Kristeva, 1982). Renkema’s multidimensional framework, which integrates sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and organizational linguistics, further guides this analysis, especially through its focus on psycholinguistic aspects and operational intertextuality as discussed by Gee (Gee, 2011; Renkema, 2004). Together, these approaches allow us to explore how social context, cognitive processes, and institutional structures all shape the language of family and marriage in Kingsolver’s fiction, making the study of her stories both meaningful and relevant in language education.

To address these complexities, this study sets out two main objectives: first, to describe the theme of how Kingsolver’s stories use language and narrative to reflect the evolving forms of family and marriage; and second, to identify the dominant discourses that shape why the characters choose and build their families. By doing so, this research aims not only to analyze stories but to illuminate the ways literature helps us understand the changing nature of human relationships.

In sum, Barbara Kingsolver’s *Homeland and Other Stories* offers a vibrant tapestry of family and marriage in contemporary society. Through careful discourse analysis, this study seeks to unravel the threads of language, culture, and identity that Kingsolver so skillfully weaves, revealing the enduring power of storytelling to help us make sense of our most important bonds.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design utilizing discourse analysis approach to investigate the construction of family and marriage values in Barbara Kingsolver's *Homeland* and *Other Stories*. The analytical framework is grounded in James Paul Gee's discourse analysis theory (Gee, 2011), which offers a robust approach to uncovering how language functions within social and cultural contexts to produce meaning. Gee's framework facilitates the examination of how narrative strategies in Kingsolver's short stories articulate and negotiate social identities and relationships related to family and marriage.

Methodologically, this research integrates Julia Kristeva's conceptual distinction between suprasegmental and intertextual analysis (Kristeva, 1982). The suprasegmental dimension focuses on linguistic expressions at the level of words, sentences, and paragraphs within the text, emphasizing the internal coherence and narrative structure of the stories. Intertextual analysis, conversely, explores the dialogic relationship between the text and external social, cultural, and historical discourses, revealing how Kingsolver's work both reflects and shapes broader societal understandings of family and marriage.

For operationalizing the suprasegmental analysis, this study adopts the story grammar model developed by Mandler and Johnson (1977) within a psycholinguistic framework as elaborated by Renkema (Renkema, 2004). This model systematically identifies key narrative components setting, beginning, development, and ending to elucidate how the internal structure of Kingsolver's stories constructs meaning and conveys values. The story grammar approach enables a detailed parsing of narrative elements, facilitating an understanding of how plot and character interactions contribute to the thematic construction of family and marriage.

Data collection proceeds through a two-stage process. Initially, the entire collection *Homeland* and *Other Stories* is read comprehensively to grasp the thematic concerns and authorial intent. Subsequently, synopses of selected stories are prepared to distill their essential narrative elements. These synopses are then reduced to simplified story units following Mandler and Johnson's principles, which serve as the basis for constructing psycholinguistic diagrams that visually represent the narrative organization and flow within each story.

Data analysis is conducted through the dual lenses of suprasegmental and intertextual analysis. Suprasegmental analysis examines the textual expressions to reveal the bounded nature of each story as a finite discourse entity, focusing on how narrative structure and language choices construct family and marriage values. Intertextual analysis applies Gee's theoretical tools to identify and interpret the interplay between Kingsolver's texts and external discourses, including cultural norms, historical contexts, and social ideologies related to kinship and marital relationships.

The integration of these analytical dimensions aims to produce a comprehensive understanding of how *Homeland* and *Other Stories* constructs, negotiates, and communicates complex social values regarding family and marriage. This study contributes to literary ecocriticism and sociolinguistics by demonstrating the role of narrative fiction in both reflecting and influencing contemporary social discourses, while also enriching pedagogical approaches to literary texts in English language education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Barbara Kingsolver's *Homeland and Other Stories* offers rich terrain for examining how contemporary values of family and marriage are constructed and negotiated through narrative. To answer the first research question, this article presents the story grammar analysis of selected stories, revealing the underlying structures and themes that shape our understanding of these relationships. While a comprehensive discourse analysis often involves mapping simple story synopses, creating psycholinguistic diagrams, and analyzing suprasegmental features, the focus here is on the fundamental narrative components that make these stories resonate. This approach illuminates the ways Kingsolver's characters navigate complex social landscapes, reflecting and challenging evolving norms of family and kinship.

In Barbara Kingsolver's "Homeland," the setting is the small Appalachian town of Morning Glory, where Gloria lives with her family and her great-grandmother, Great Mam, who holds the Cherokee heritage. The beginning focuses on Gloria's reflections about her family's past and Great Mam's stories about their Cherokee roots and respect for nature. A complex reaction happens when the family travels to Tennessee to reconnect Great Mam with her homeland, but Gloria feels disappointed by the tourist attractions that show a fake version of Cherokee culture. The goal path of the story is the family's effort to honor their heritage and Great Mam's identity by returning to their ancestral land, despite the challenges of cultural loss. The ending comes with Great Mam's death, but Gloria carries on her great-grandmother's teachings and wisdom, showing how family values and cultural lessons survive through generations even in times of change.

Building on the theme of family legacy and honoring roots, "Blueprints" tells about Lydia and Whitman, who move from Sacramento to a small, quiet cabin in Blind Gap, hoping for a better and more loving life as a setting. The beginning shows their excitement, but soon life there is harder than they thought. The complex reaction is that both feel frustrated, lonely, and distant—from each other and their new home. Lydia struggles with her busy teaching job, and Whitman feels unappreciated. They don't communicate well, making things worse. The goal path shows their efforts to adjust and save their relationship, but problems and disappointment stay. The ending has no clear answer; Lydia and Whitman stay tense. Kingsolver shows how new places and broken dreams can test people and their relationships.

Next, transitioning from the strains of partnership to the contemplation of family choices, "Covered Bridge" talks about marriage and deciding whether to have children. The story is set in a quiet town in Indiana, where the narrator, a botany teacher, and his wife Lena, a toxicologist, live a thoughtful and different life. The beginning shows them thinking about their marriage and the usual pressure to have kids from friends like the MacElroys. The complex reaction happens as Lena and the narrator feel worried about having children because of Lena's family losses, her brother's fertility problems, and her own health. Babysitting their friends' daughter Melinda makes them realize how much sacrifice parenting needs. The goal path follows their honest talks as they try to balance social pressure and their wish to keep their life as it is. The ending shows Lena sure that having children is not right for them, especially because of her health, and the narrator supports her. Kingsolver shows how love, sacrifice, and social pressure affect family choices.

Still extending the theme of family into single parenthood, Kingsolver's "Quality Time" explores the challenges of single parenthood through Miriam, a librarian raising her curious daughter Rennie in suburban America. The beginning describes Miriam's busy mornings as she balances work and caring for Rennie, who asks many questions. The complex reaction appears as Miriam struggles emotionally and practically with single parenting, worrying about Rennie's understanding of hard topics like death, her own fears, and the pressure to give "quality time" despite a busy life. Family interactions with her ex-husband Lute and sister Janice remind her how fragile family life is. The goal path follows Miriam's efforts to create a loving, supportive home through small acts, honest talks, and being present even when tired. The ending is quiet but meaningful: Miriam learns that true quality time is about everyday love and attention, not big gestures. Kingsolver highlights the strength of single parents and the importance of emotional connection.

Finally, Kingsolver's "Stone Dreams" is about family, wanting more, and finding yourself. The story happens in the dry Southwest, especially the Petrified Forest, which shows the woman's feelings. The story starts with a 39-year-old woman traveling with Peter, who is not her husband. She wants to follow a childhood dream and leave her unhappy marriage with Nathan. She feels confused because she cares about Nathan but also likes Peter. The Petrified Forest is not what she expected. Talking with Peter makes her think about her life. She tries to understand her feelings, decide about her marriage, and connect with her daughter Julie. Julie sends her a kind note telling her to make her own choices. The story ends with the woman alone, thinking about her feelings and future. "Stone Dreams" shows how finding happiness can be hard, especially in tough families.

Next, for answering the second research question, the researchers explore how Kingsolver uses her characters and their experiences to show extended families, cohabiting couples, childfree marriages, single-parent households, and dysfunctional families and to find out that why do they choose the family they build. Through these stories, Kingsolver highlights the complexity and diversity of family life in contemporary society:

The choice to build and maintain an extended family in "Homeland" is further shaped by the family's rural, village, and agrarian environment, which both enables and necessitates this structure. The story is set in Morning Glory, a small coal-mining town surrounded by encroaching forest and fertile land:

"We lived in Morning Glory, a coal town hacked with sharp blades out of a forest that threatened always to take it back. The hickories encroached on the town, springing up unbidden in the middle of dog pens and front yards and the cemetery. The creeping vines for which the town was named drew themselves along wire fences and up the sides of houses with the persistence of the displaced." (Kingsolver, 1989, p. 2).

This setting, with its close relationship to the land and cycles of nature, fosters a lifestyle where family members depend on one another for both labor and survival. Great Mam's agricultural wisdom such as her belief that "a person can live on green corn and beans, Florence Ann. There's no shame in vegetables" reflects the practical knowledge passed down in rural extended families. Research shows that in agrarian and village contexts, extended families are more common and more functional

because agricultural work, food production, and resource management require cooperation across generations (Laslett & Wall, 1972; McC. Netting et al., 1984).

In “Blueprints,” Kingsolver explores how Lydia and Whitman’s move from urban Sacramento to the rural isolation of Blind Gap challenges their partnership and cohabitation. Their small cabin—with the bathroom as the only separate room—forces constant closeness, causing tension: “You sleep in the bathtub,” Lydia tells Whitman, “I’m sorry the light keeps you awake. But I’m not going to do my lesson plans in the bathroom.” Their home, set on six acres reached by a dirt road, is both a refuge and a source of strain:

“The best part of her day is the walk home from school... through a tunnel of hemlocks, and then follows Blind Creek up the mountain to their six acres” (Kingsolver, 1989, p. 26).

Despite difficulties, Lydia and Whitman stay together, shaped by their shared history, beliefs, and the demands of rural life. Lydia reflects, “when the going gets rough you fall back on whatever awful thing you grew up with,” showing how childhood and environment influence adult relationships. Kingsolver’s story demonstrates how rural cohabiting families are formed through the interplay of past experiences, environmental challenges, and evolving family ideas (Raley & Stop, 2024).

Moving from rural partnership challenges, “Covered Bridge” looks at how a couple decides to stay childfree based on their values and outside pressures. Lena and her husband live in a quiet Indiana town and have built a happy life focused on their work and love of nature:

“We bought a two-story house in the maple shade of Convocation Street and assembled our collective belongings there, but as for a life, each of us already had one” (Kingsolver, 1989, p. 43).

They find meaning in their jobs and each other, not in having kids. When they babysit their friends’ daughter Melinda, they see that parenting is hard and would change their life. Research shows many childfree couples choose this to keep freedom and a good relationship, even if society judges them (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). Gillespie says childfree couples build lives on shared interests and respect, not traditional roles (Corbett, 2018). Lena says, “If I wanted to do it solo, what’s the point of being married? I could just use a turkey baster,” showing how much they value partnership and making choices together. So, “Covered Bridge” shows that being childfree can be a positive, thoughtful choice shaped by values, environment, and their idea of family.

Extending the exploration of non-traditional family forms, “Quality Time” shows single parenthood as a family form built out of both necessity and strength. In “Quality Time,” Kingsolver shows single parenthood as both hard and strong. Miriam is a single mom who plans her busy days around her job and her daughter Rennie: “We don’t even have time for that, Rennie. We’re on a schedule today.” Being organized helps Miriam manage everything:

“Organization is the religion of the single parent... Miriam is faithful about the business of getting each thing done in its turn...” (Kingsolver, 1989, p. 64).

Studies say single moms often make strong routines to handle work and parenting alone (Camenzuli, 2024; Geiger, 2023). The story happens in busy Southern California, where Miriam feels alone and responsible. Her ex, Lute, is gone: “Lute was already out of the picture by that time...” Rennie notices her dad is not there. Miriam has to be both the provider and caregiver, making a family that is strong and caring. Research shows single-parent families often become close because they depend on each other (Amato & Patterson, 2020). Miriam thinks being there and setting a good example is more important than big plans or perfect moments.

Finally, “Stone Dreams,” the family is shaped by emotional distance, longing, and Diana’s struggle to be true to herself outside traditional marriage. Diana stays in her complicated family because of emotional habits, care for her daughter, and her search for authenticity. She says,

“We stayed together because he didn’t seem to have other plans, and because I couldn’t picture myself as being husbandless. There was my daughter to consider, still young, in need of years of shelter” (Kingsolver, 1989, p. 82).

Her responsibility to Julie and fear of loneliness keep her in a marriage that no longer makes her happy. Though she seeks closeness and excitement with Peter, she knows, “Peter had two grown sons... He wasn’t someone I could marry” (Kingsolver, 1989, p. 82). Diana’s family life is a compromise to protect her daughter, keep stability, and meet her own needs within limits. This fits studies showing many, especially women, balance personal happiness with family duties (Burk et al., 2021; Giddens, 2004). Kingsolver presents family as a flexible, changing arrangement shaped by desires and real life.

CONCLUSION

As conclusion, this study shows that Barbara Kingsolver’s *Homeland* and *Other Stories* talks about how families and marriages are changing today. The five stories show many kinds of families, like big families, couples living together, single parents, couples without kids, and families with problems. Each family is shaped by their values and life challenges. The stories show that people choose their family life for different reasons, like culture, hard times, and wanting to be happy. This study suggests Kingsolver’s stories help readers think about what family and marriage can be. In the future, researchers can study these stories in other ways, like comparing with other authors or looking at history and society. Teachers can also use these stories to help students learn about different families and cultures.

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