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THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE IMAGES OF A FEMALE
PROTAGONIST AND NATURE
(AS DEPICTED IN THE NOVEL 'WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING'
BY DELIA OWENS)

“*Where the Crawdads Sing*” is a 2018 coming-of-age murder mystery novel by American zoologist Delia Owens. By April 2023, the book had sold over 18 million copies, making it one of the contemporary bestsellers.

Owens was born and grew up in southern Georgia, where she spent most of her life in or near true wilderness. She then moved to Zambia with her husband, where they did conservation work and contributed to reducing the poaching of elephants. In 1996, ABC aired a documentary about the Owens family, which included footage of an alleged poacher being killed. She denies involvement, but the novel has raised suspicions due to possible parallels between the main character Kya and her case, and Delia's own alleged accusation.

In spite of “*Where the Crawdads Sing*” being Owens’ debut work, it demonstrates a wide range of issues. Thus, the narrative touches upon moral, social, and personal aspects, exploring such themes as parent–child relationships, the choice between life and death, racial segregation, domestic violence, the issue of non-intervention in private life, and environmental protection.

The story follows two timelines that gradually intertwine. The first timeline describes the life of a young girl named Kya who’s abandoned to survive on her own as she grows up barely capable of making ends meet isolated in the marshes of North Carolina. The second timeline follows an investigation into the apparent murder of Chase Andrews, a local ladies’ man who knows no limits in attaining the desired in Barkley Cove, a fictional coastal town of North Carolina.

In the process of maturation, the main character faces not only the children’s and teenage problems, but also the issue of survival among the people who are hostile towards her for no apparent reason.

Thus, Kya finds herself in the situation when a six-year-old child is left to fend for herself due to the fact that both parents were unable to take care of her as a consequence of their troubled relationship. Kya’ alcoholic father’s mistreatment of her mother led to the latter’s abandonment of her child in the hope of escaping the harsh living conditions, leaving Kya with her father, who, although physically present, was emotionally distant and abusive. Social services as well as the local church also failed to provide proper support for the female protagonist's development, and instead influenced her negatively, subjecting her to neglect and rejection on behalf of the judgmental rather than truly caring locals.

There are two ways of character characterization in literature: explicit and implicit. Explicit characterization means that the author literally tells the reader what a character is like, while implicit characterization makes the reader draw conclusions on their own. In spite of the reader partially getting to know the female

protagonist explicitly, due to the mention of her height, physique, and the colour of her eyes and hair, it is mainly implicitly that her image is formed: through her words, thoughts, actions, other characters' opinion about her, and the environment where she spends her whole life. Accordingly, another image emerges, that is the image of nature, which serves as a background against which Kya grows, develops, matures and learns to accept herself, to love and to be loved.

The interaction between the images of nature and the female protagonist begins with Kya's childhood years. As she is left with her father, her living conditions get increasingly unbearable, forcing her to seek shelter outside the shack, and eventually leading her to find comfort and solace in the marsh. Kya learns to read the patterns of tides, the cries of gulls, and the behavior of insects with careful precision, replacing the education she was denied at school. The one-time attempt to attend school provokes other children's mockery, them calling her names like "beetle", "swamp rat", and especially "The Marsh Girl", a label that sticks with her throughout her life. To them, she is "dirty", "wild" and "feral" – traits inherent to nature, which is meanwhile personified, with the forest "in an expectant mood" and nature "living an insolent life," symbolizing the emergence of their unity. Moreover, the birds play a significant role in the novel, serving as Kya's newfound family, particularly seagulls, which are often viewed as outcasts in the animal world, once again highlighting the female protagonist's isolation.

As Kya grows older, her dependence on the marsh becomes apparent. It is not just a refuge to her anymore, but also the only source of food and gas money for her motorboat. She begins to harvest fish and, later, mussels, since "*Mussels didn't have eyes to look at her like the fish did*". This line reflects Kya's humanity and refusal to use her newfound home for her own needs, even when on the verge of starvation. Her collection of shells, feathers, insects and other natural items also becomes but a steady source of income over time, but initially serves as a symbol of a family she never had – something she could hold, confide in, and cling to when the world felt too far away.

One of the most telling moments occurs when she steps on a rusty nail while walking barefoot. With no one around to care for her, she treats the wound herself by soaking her foot in the salty marsh water and covering it with mud. This episode, though simple, is deeply symbolic: it reveals how completely abandoned she is by the adult world and how the marsh becomes both her healer and guardian. Rather than panic or despair, Kya instinctively turns to nature for help, a response that foreshadows the self-reliant woman she will become.

Another significant symbol in Kya's development is the reading cabin, a quiet sanctuary in the woods where the boundary between the natural world and her inner world blurs. With the help of Tate, one of the few people who do not view her as an outcast, Kya is introduced to the world of books. Literacy becomes a gateway to new ideas and self-expression, and Kya starts publishing poetry in the local newspaper under the name Amanda Hamilton. Through her writing, she finds her voice in a world that had long silenced her. The verse "*Trapped inside, love is caged beast, eating its own flesh*" suggests that for Kya, love is both desired and feared, and when unable to fully embrace or share it, she is left to suffer in silence.

As her relationship with Tate develops, Kya tends to view it as an instinctive bond rooted in natural patterns, much like the mating behaviors she observes in wildlife. She analyzes the interactions as strategic, like those she sees in fireflies where mating often involves deception. The image shifts as Tate introduces her to a gentler emotional connection. As she experiences trust and affection, she begins to question whether human relationships might be more than mere instinct-driven interactions. This fragile hope, however, is shattered when Tate abandons her, reinforcing her original belief that love, like in nature, often leads to betrayal.

Her brief relationship with Chase Andrews only intensifies this belief – after seducing her and promising commitment, he not only distances himself but humiliates her by becoming engaged to another woman. The betrayal reaches a devastating peak when Chase later attempts to assault Kya – an act that confirms her perception of human relationships as predatory and unsafe. Her emotional retreat reflects a return to survival mode, where intimacy is viewed not as a source of comfort, but as a vulnerability.

After being left behind by both Tate and Chase, Kya retreats fully into the one constant in her life – the marsh. Where human relationships bring pain, nature offers silent companionship and unwavering presence. The gulls, trees, tides, and grasses become her family – not metaphorically, but truly. She watches animals and speaks to the birds, gives them names, and trusts them to return more reliably than people. Big Red, a seagull, never fails to return to be fed with grits, and Coop, a Cooper's Hawk, invariably visits her at night, unlike her mother: *“My Ma walked off one day and didn't come back. The mama deer always come back.”* The natural world doesn't judge or reject, it shelters; the marsh does not just surround her, it makes her feel “...grasped, held. Not alone.” In the absence of human affection, Kya's emotional survival depends on the intimacy she finds with the land itself: “... and the marsh became her mother. Whenever she stumbled, it was the land that caught her.” Kya publishes a book about her natural objects collection, which serves not only as a source of income, but a personal family album as well. Its contents are the only constants she has, and they offer her the emotional fulfillment that human relationships failed to provide. “Her love of the marsh” became not only “her life's work”, but her whole life, “there are no layers between her and her planet.”

By the end of the novel, nature becomes Kya's only source of strength, inspiration, and life itself. It is not merely a substitute for family – it is her entire community: the only place where she feels truly welcomed, accepted, cherished, and loved. Upon her release from jail, where she was held due to the accusation of Chase Andrews' murder, Kya immediately returns to the only world that has never betrayed her – the marsh. Her first instinct is to run to the beach to feed the gulls. She doesn't linger with her brother, turns down a prestigious job offer in a lab, and avoids the spotlight of academic lectures. Instead, she retreats into the marsh, choosing the quiet constancy of nature over the instability of human relationships.

Throughout Kya's growing up, maturing and entering womanhood, nature invariably provides her with a sense of belonging, purpose, and peace that human society consistently denies. It does not merely sustain her physically, ensuring her survival and becoming her natural habitat, but nurtures her emotionally and intellectually, becoming her family and her whole life. Thus, it is not survival in harsh conditions that the novel explores, but rather the search for and the discovery of one's true self through a profound unity with the natural environment, which, ultimately, is our shared home: the planet itself.