

**Negotiating Societal and Environmental Challenges in Barbara
Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour***

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Abstract

Mankind in the present world is doomed to deal with the challenges out forward by the pressing issue called climate change. It is assured that the human race could never evade its catastrophic effects. Men and women should attain the knowledge of the reality and exercise their democratic rights to make a difference in the physical world. The role of women in this noble deed is inevitable. They also should be endowed with the knowledge and understanding to face the challenges by the changing environmental circumstances. To the contrary, women themselves are made subservient in the prevailing social norms and their potentiality remains untapped due to the gender bias. They are denied land rights, financial resources and accession to decision making.

The present study explores the emergence of Dellarobia, the protagonist of Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*. The ignorance and lack of education of the female misleads her to interpret the unusual migration of the monarch butterflies as a vision of glory or God's presence. She could not relate it to the climate change and its results. In the later part of the novel, Dellarobia emerges out of the suppressing societal norms and unleashes her knowledge and capabilities to rescue the innocent creatures.

Key words: Climate Change, Monarch butterflies, metamorphosis

Introduction:

Among the challenges faced by the humanity in the present century, climate change is the crucial and debatable one. The extraordinary increase in the warming level has resulted in climate change, increase in global temperature, warming ocean, melting glaciers, diminishing snow cover, variations in sea level, declining arctic sea

ice, unusual happenings and acidification of ocean. Lawrence Buell, in his foundational text in eco-criticism, *The Environmental Imagination* states that literature plays a crucial role in shaping environmental consciousness of mankind. (Buell, 1995)

Born in 1955 in Maryland, Barbara Kingsolver's early days were spent in Nicholas County, the rural part of Kentucky. Mary Ellen Snodgrass, in her book titled *Barbara Kingsolver: A Literary Companion* highlights Kingsolver's focus on ecological responsibility, human rights, and social justice. (Snodgrass, 2004) Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* is set in the fictional, rural and poor town of Tennessee, which echoes her own early background. The novel is centred on a cluster of social issues, with its main focus on climate change and its outcomes. The story depicts the life of Dellarobia Turnbow, a young woman in the rural, poor town of Tennessee.

Significance of Study:

Among the literary works, grouped in the genre called Climate Fiction, *Flight Behaviour* occupies the prestigious position as it personalizes a global issue and increases the awareness of the readers. Climate change is an abstract and overwhelming reality. Kingsolver views the issue through the lens of ecological science. She heightens the intensity and effect of her narration by personalizing the poverty of the rural community and transformation of the female protagonist. The migration of the monarch butterflies is disrupted and goes wrong. This unusual happening has been used as a powerful metaphor to denote the ecological breakdown.

Kingsolver analyses the causes and effects of the intersection of human behaviour and environmental crisis in *Flight Behaviour*. Her objective to facilitate the accession to the complex issue of climate change is possible by her expertise in converting the scientific facts into human story. The powerful narration highlights the severe consequences of environmental neglect and challenges the void existing between the human beings and nature. Kingsolver has given a new perspective to the fast-approaching environmental degradation by highlighting the disproportionate impacts of climate change on the economic fall of the rural community.

The journey of Dellarobia Turnbow, the protagonist of the novel is crucial; she travels with new and incomprehensible experiences from ignorance to ecological consciousness. The journey of the woman awakens the readers to the booming disastrous reality. At the initial stage, Dellarobia is presented as a woman in despair.

But, she undergoes the transformation, experiences a shift in her consciousness and becomes responsible to confront the realities of a changing world.

Theoretical Framework:

An ecofeminist reading of Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* reveals the intertwined oppression of women and nature. The individual empowerment of the female protagonist reflects the developing ecological consciousness. Dellarobia's emerges from the condition of a restricted, passive housewife to an educated and empowered agent of change. She stands witness to the dismantling of patriarchal constraints. It is explicit that the patriarchal structures exploit the rural communities as well as the environment. She bridges the **human and non-human worlds. She is resolved to demonstrate how the environmental degradation will negatively impact the livelihood of her community. The present study focuses on Kingsolver's perception on the interlinked gender and environmental issues**

The Incompatibility and Changing Course of Life:

Dellarobia Turnbow is trapped in an unfulfilling marriage with an incompatible partner. She lives on the property of her parents-in-law. Life as a farmer's wife in the southern Appalachians rural background, imprisons her in an inescapable rural poverty and the drudgery. Dellarobia decides to go astray by her secret meetings with Jimmy in the woods near her house. On her way, she notices the strange landscape around her which she believes to be a forest fire. She is in maze because the temperature remains normal. Dellarobia is alarmed by the strangeness in nature and returns home without committing sin. She is dumb-folded by the scene that she witnessed. She could not reveal it to anyone as she herself has no proper knowledge about it. She is frightened of the suspicion around her on her unusual visit to the forest.

The necessity to unravel the mystery arises, when Dellarobia's father-in-law desires to sign a contract with a logging company and deforest their land. Dellarobia is stunned to hear it because the place, where she witnessed the mysterious fire is also brought under deforestation. She is forced to reveal the mystery to Cub to enable him decide further move. Cub and his team are wonderstruck on witnessing the unbelievable scene. The secret of the mystery is found out that it is not fire but the monarch butterfly population, which has migrated from the fictional Feathertown, Tennessee. It is shocking to know that the climate change has made a strong impact

on the life style of these nonhuman beings. The unusual strange successive natural happenings by the climate change have driven their normal winter habitat in Mexico in floods. Having been pushed to the unstable life, the butterflies have changed their traditional route and migrated to a wrong location. Kingsolver describes the astonishing sight of the butterflies as the unearthly beauty, a version of glory, a valley of light, an ethereal wind and a lake of fire. Dellarobia assumes the new arrival of butterflies has a significant message to convey to her. She undergoes a change and views her life in the positive perspective. Till the arrival of the butterflies, Dellarobia's life has been narrowed down to a state of dullness. The sight of the species has altered the course of her life. She could sense the comprehension of her own self. She feels the shadow of sadness has been lifted and brightness has been rising in her life. Being enchanted by the sight, Dellarobia spends hours together at the spot. She is sure the sight of the butterflies is "... something far fiercer and more wondrous than either of those elements alone. The impossible." (*Flight* 21-22)

In spite of finding solace and happiness by the sight of the butterflies, Dellarobia has to meet a different reaction from her family members. The news of the new arrival of butterflies is spreads in the Sunday congregation. Hesther, the mother-in-law of Dellarobia is dissatisfied by the whole happenings in the town. Dellarobia develops her new acquaintance with a Mexican family. Their narration of the visit of the migrated butterflies to Mexico enraptures her attention. She decides to accept their invitation to Mexico at a convenient time.

The Varied Perceptions:

The outlook of the villagers is different as far as the butterfly scene is concerned. They find religious significance in the event. The unnoticed town gains sudden attention of the tourists, journalists and scientists and pulls them towards it. Kingsolver passes a painful comment, "...nobody was asking why the butterflies were there." (*Flight* 32) Yet, their perceptions differ from one another. Dellarobia considers the sight of the butterflies as a warning sign to keep up her morality. Her father-in-law finds it a source of monetary benefit to upgrade the economic status of the family. Some of the residents of the village associate the event with the rebirth of the Lord.

Fortunately, Dellarobia meets Ovid Byron, the entomologist, who has come to explore the unusual phenomenon in Feathertown. He reveals the shocking fact that

the butterflies are the alarming sign of global threat. In his discussion with Dellarobia, Ovid comes out certain serious issues, related to climate change. His words are threatening. He confirms the drastic changes in the climate as the reasons for the presence of the butterflies in their unaccustomed land. He assures mankind is marching towards a new universe: "A whole new earth." (*Flight* 325) Dellarobia is definite that no human being could exist in the new world. Residing in the camper van in the land of Dellarobia's family, Ovid pursues his research work pays an allowance to her. The news that her husband is intense in signing the logging contract makes Hesther anxious and helpless. Her patriarchal husband will not pay heed to her words.

Obliging the invitation, extended by Ovid, Dellarobia spends the day at the butterfly site. Dellarobia gains knowledge of the work of an entomologist. Contradictory to her expectations, she gets acute shock on knowing about the hazardous results of climate change on the migration habits of monarch butterflies. Ovid proves to be epitome of concern for the harmonious life of the species. It is perfect that Kingsolver has named the entomologist as Ovid to hint at the narrative poem *Metamorphosis* of Ovid, the Roman poet. (Ovid, 1893) In *Flight Behaviour*, the process of metamorphosis happens at two levels. The monarch butterflies migrate from their usual habitat to an unknown stay. Dellarobia undergoes transition from her previous life of discontentment to new identity. Instead of worrying about herself, Dellarobia is pained by the sight of the destitute butterflies that are denied their right to live by the man-made weather patterns. Dellarobia, who has been economical in family expenses, ventures to help the scientists to construct a field laboratory, with the noble intention of saving the butterflies. With the help of the scientists, she attempts to transfer them to a warmer place. Ovid justifies and appreciates the act of Dellarobia, saying "... this is a concern of conscience, not of biology." (*Flight* 327)

At one stage, Dellarobia becomes knowledgeable of the migration of the butterflies. She exhibits her resentment to Cub on his father's logging business. So to say, she acquires the ecological consciousness by recognizing the plight of the environment. She analyses the unusual migration of the butterflies and explains to Cub with scientific reasons. "... they shouldn't have, because the winter is too cold here. But they came because of the things being too warm." (*Flight* 259) But, as expected by her, Cub could not be motivated to this way of thinking.

As the novel proceeds, the transformation of Dellarobia is transparent and obvious. She feels bored of the reluctance of the family in stopping the logging business. She is impelled to join hands with Ovid both in his life and his pursuit of research. Though the knowledge of Dellarobia in entomology is scanty, she is sure to create awareness among the future generation about the hazardous results of climate change on the butterflies. By the time, she ends her domestic life with Ovid, the butterflies awaken as the winter is over.

The Metamorphosis

Barbara Kingsolver depicts Dellarobia, the main character as someone who does not believe in climate change at first. Kingsolver describes the ignorant woman as "... she knew to be wary of that". (*Flight* 202) The progression in the thought process of Dellarobia happens by her acquaintance with the entomologists. Her analytic knowledge on climate change becomes vast. But the same progression could not be expected from her family members. Cub loses his temper on hearing the term global warming from Dellarobia. Out of impatience, he snorts and mentions the changes at the global level as "global weirding". (*Flight* 361) His strong religious hold prompts him to say "... weather is the Lord's business" (*Flight* 361)

The metamorphosis of the character Dellarobia needs special attention. As the tiny butterflies have lost their destination, she feels lost in her domestic life due to the societal expectations. She is put in shackles by the gender norms of the society. But the inner spirit and strength of Dellarobia propels her towards freedom and exposure to new horizons. Deprived of education by the new entanglement of married life, Dellarobia spends her days almost monotonously with regret. (*Flight* 13) Her opinion of her weak-willed husband is well expressed by Kingsolver as "moves in slow motion" and "lets his mother boss him around". (*Flight* 11 - 12) The gender norms of the culture keep her in fetters, which she intends to shed to move in the path of freedom.

Rejection is the main ruling ideology of Dellarobia's family. According to the specific norms of the provincial town of Dellarobia, education is considered an unwanted attribute to a woman. For instance, Cub and his sisters consider the college as the ir "enemy territory". They are under the wrong assumption that the presence of the institution in their place is prickly to the whole town. By its functioning, the "whole town were given over to the mischief of privileged". (*Flight* 339) Dellarobia

defies the social norms, takes part in exploring the butterfly effect with Ovid, “in the sheep barn”. (*Flight 258*) The rural society looks strangely at neither the incomprehensible conduct nor the financial stability of Dellarobia. Even she considers the butterfly effect as the sign of God at the beginning. As the other residents of the village, she also has been unaware of the climate changes, the melting of glaciers or the ozone holes. She feels “... abashed for the huge things she did not know”. (*Flight 141*) Her long talks with Ovid enlightens her that the creatures will “meet their End of Days” (*Flight 270*) due to climate change. This realization has transformed her to a noble level that she gets the experience that “the forest of flame has lifted her despair”. (*Flight 272*) The only determination in her is to conserve nature.

The entire process of metamorphosis is over, when Dellarobia decides to depart from her domestic bond. Getting liberated from the fear of the society, she continues her study in the college and takes care of her children as well. Resembling the revival of the butterflies from the snowfall, she decides to start her life in the new trodden path. She asserts that everything cannot stay how it is, no matter how grown-ups want it. (*Flight 458*)

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