

The Future of Climate Change and Ecofeminism in Barbara Kingsolver's Novels

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Abstract

Thematically, *Flight Behavior* departs from *Prodigal Summer* in its examination of the reality and effects of climate change. This novel focuses on those who deny or oppose the reality of climate change and its impact on their lives. The men in *Flight Behavior*, with the notable exception of the scientist Byron, perpetuate exploitative land use practises. This novel's emphasis on animals and their reproductive success opens up a crucial ecofeminist route. The monarchs have had to relocate their home and nesting grounds due to climate change, and their uncertain yet ominous future is mirrored by other difficult births in the novel: Dellarobia has a traumatic birthing experience with Hester's lambs as she comes to terms with the death of her and Cub's child.

Keywords: Flight Behavior, Prodigal Summer, Ecofeminism, and Climate Change.

Shannon Bell's *Our Roots Run Deep* as *Ironweed* highlights cautious activism in most women's stories. Before coal ash, flooding, landslides, and erosion caused by

exploitative land use, they appreciated nature. They saved their family after facing these challenges. *Our Roots Run Deep* as *Ironweed*'s women have a renewed appreciation for nature and a newfound activism. After been directly touched by environmental plunder, people now care about the numbers. *Flight Behavior*'s protagonist joins a similar organisation after seeing climate change in her backyard. This chapter continues my gendered responses to nonhuman's analysis. *Flight Behavior*'s men, except for Byron the scientist, continue exploitative land use as Dellarobia, the primary heroine, learns about climate change in her garden and city.

Flight Behavior explores climate change differently than *Prodigal Summer*. This tale explores climate change deniers and their effects. Dellarobia slowly accepts climate change. *Flight Behavior* is not a climate change PSA. The tale places future generations at jeopardy. Climate change has forced the monarchs to move, and Dellarobia's painful delivery experience with Hester's lambs mirrors their uncertain yet grim future. This novel's focus on animals and their reproductive success establishes an important ecofeminist path. Dellarobia's climate change denial is reflected in the critters' reproductive

success and location. Human-nonhuman parallels criticise climate change's impact on our reproductive success. This narrative criticises anthropocentrism by showing that ignoring environmental abuses will hurt future generations.

Dellarobia must face both local (Tennessee) and worldwide environmental disasters in *Flight Behavior* (Mexico). She loves her children, but her husband and his family irritate her. She married Cub, the junior Turnbow man, impulsively after their child died. Dellarobia and Cub live on a section of the family farm that Hester and Bear (Cub's parents) rule over, barring them from important financial decisions that could harm their portion. Dellarobia's words also seem wrong to Hester.

The butterflies change everything for Dellarobia. She initially thinks the peak is on fire and the sign is religious, but they are monarch butterflies. She meets reporters and Dr. Byron, who is researching monarchs and why they no longer go to Mexico. She learns from him and his assistants that the world is out of rhythm because humans misuse land. She leaves her patriarchal husband's family after realising she must survive. Animals and the surroundings show her progress throughout the story.

Flight Behavior characters in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* have gendered alien responses. Males, including Bear Turnbow, use the land as if they own it, making decisions without considering the ecosystem or long-term implications. Dellarobia learns how animals, nature, and humans are

intertwined, how males maintain patriarchal, exploitative land practises that devalue women, animals, and nature, and how nonhumans are affected by human exceptionalism. Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* seems to be covering the same topics as *Prodigal Summer*. I believe Kingsolver explores similar issues in both novels, but she does not repeat them. *Prodigal Summer* explored storytelling, natural ecologies, and gendered responses to traditional farming methods. Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* challenges gendered natural responses. The climatic problem and failed progeny and futures are the novel's main topics. The distracted monarchs, weak newborn lamb, and miscarriages symbolise this philosophy.

"We do not have to presume that nature is a domain of harmony and tranquilly, with which people will never be in conflict," Val Plumwood advises in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Rejecting western nature treatment requires an intellectual, critical, and political assessment of nature (37). Plumwood's rallying cry is twofold. First, nature is not a defenceless victim or a dumping ground for our material and cultural problems. Nature is competent. Nature can heal itself, but only so much. Humans strain nature's self-repair by producing and consuming more. Second, as Plumwood stated, fixing Western nature management will require ongoing political, research, and public education efforts. Plumwood's remark gives nature the freedom to operate as it pleases, despite humans' seeming desire to dominate it (37). *Flight Behavior* examines climate change

and its effects on people. If humans are so self-centered that they ignore animals and nature, they will hopefully survive.

This paper's final chapter changes from *Prodigal Summer's* status quo to *Flight Behavior's* future. The third chapter examined how masculinist land practises replicated patriarchal, exploitative environmental usage and how only the novel's female characters perceived ecological alternatives. This chapter discusses the consequences of ignoring environmental exploitation and climate change. This chapter will cover denial, reality, and climate change mitigation to continue discussing realities and implications. I'll study how humans and nonhumans deny reality. Kingsolver said in an interview that others' denial inspired this novel. I'll list the middle class's environmental needs. Dellarobia becomes a pseudoscientist from a housewife. The environmental movement's butterfly conservationists in Appalachia are a parody. Dellarobia also resembles many of the ladies in chapter two who became reluctant environmentalists. Finally, hope. Dellarobia leads Kingsolver's audience to good change. The novel's ending is uncertain, but I think it's optimistic because of resistance.

Flight Behavior's main principles are confirmed by Patrick Murphy's "Pessimism, Optimism, Human Inertia, and Anthropogenic Climate Change" article. He emphasizes Dellarobia's growth and independence from the Turnbow home, like Linda Wagner-Martin. This chapter explores this. Murphy examines climate change realities and effects. In this thesis, I can analyse Dellarobia and her family's

climate change denial culture, but not the science. Dellarobia's growing self-awareness and "the scientific investigation of the monarchs' adjustment of their historic multigenerational travel patterns and the chief scientist's links of it and climate change" are the first and second ("Pessimism, Optimism" 158). The monarch's flight habit contrasts with the Turnbow family and many of their neighbours' multigenerational non-migration. Murphy adds, "The second storyline affords Kingsolver a big chance to educate readers on the effects of climate change on flora and wildlife in terms of the disturbance of seasonal cycles and the temperature gradients that promote relocation and, in some cases, extinction" ("Pessimism, Optimism" 158).

Murphy also analyses Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and other climate change literature. "The problem is not one of means, but of recognition, acceptance, and resolve to act," he says, comparing *Flight Behavior's* optimism with gloominess (Murphy 149, emphasis added). His paper investigates how science affects people who accept or reject truths. *Flight Behavior* and other climate change novels he references highlight the problem people have accepting what most scientists and society recognise as fact and reality. Murphy's skeptic judgement matches mine. Together, we must create the best logic and strongest case.

Especially when debating sceptics or people who refuse to recognise climate change and distract attention with comments like the climate and earth always changing, etc.

Start with military chiefs, energy firms, and insurance companies. (150)

Kingsolver's tale contrasts Dellarobia's thrift store buying and frugality with the national environmental impact that encourages people to drive less. Murphy suggests starting with well-known or trusted information sources to persuade climate change deniers. Dellarobia rarely drives or flies. To affect Dellarobia and her family, the discourse must change. Whether they attribute the monarch butterflies' flight path change to a miracle, free will, or global warming, the characters can see its effects.

Kingsolver, a southern Appalachian farmer and writer, is well-suited to analyse and fictionalise the region's environmental challenges. She told Time:

Climate change is a real threat to our agriculture, which has survived several disasters. It's destroying our agriculture. Record-breaking heat. We had record-breaking droughts. Thus, my conservative rural neighbors are most affected by climate change. I think these people are the worst at understanding and accepting climate change. Because they are obliged to our region's biggest sector, the coal industry, our local officials purposely mislead us and oppose any environmental regulation that could limit carbon emissions. We're between hell and the sea. Write a novel? (Walsh)

The quote isn't wasted. Kingsolver comments on a concept I established in the last chapter and will continue in this one: traditional environmental practices are bad for all of us since they may provide a short-term answer but have long-term and more severe effects. Poor environmental

management causes climate change, which harms the agricultural economy and is culturally shameful.

Dellarobia must speak up in a family that wants to log the mountaintop and a culture that wants to keep nature separate. Dellarobia discovers the relationship between humans and nonhumans, which was always the reality. The story supports Appalachian ecofeminists since their well-being as ethnic outsiders is related to nonhuman nature. A damaging economic system disproportionately affects Dellarobia and nonhumans.

Her familial and communal standing disempowers her. Hester and Bear live across the farm from her and Cub. Dellarobia's family owes Hester and Bear, who take everything without giving anything back. Hester and Bear borrowed Dellarobia's farm part without her knowledge. Dellarobia cannot influence family decisions as an outsider. She communicates through her husband, whom she often sees as powerless against Hester's stubbornness. The family's main concern is Bear's lien on the farm. Bear claims that logging the slope will earn enough money to keep a section of the farm from a collection agency. Bear persists despite witnessing the butterflies and hearing villagers call them signs from God. Hester tells Dellarobia:

Bear signed the agreement....Despite weather, he'll continue. King Billies [butterflies]. Why couldn't they wait a month? I pray about it daily, but you noticed first.... He and Peanut Norwood

refuse... Money isn't everything. It's money. But rushing while ignoring others. Perhaps. They've driven each other. Man-to-man. (133)

Logging has become male posturing. Dellarobia, frustrated by a deforested slope, contemplates "the basic themes: man against man, man against himself" and asks if man can "ever be for anything" (133). This mood ties to intersectionality by reflecting man's futile struggle against objects. Humans are interwoven with the ecology, therefore waging war on one part would eventually affect the others.

Continuing with the logging will result in the same destruction that forced the monarchs to modify their migration routes. Logging destroyed butterflies' habitats. Preston befriends Josefina at school, whose family moved from the monarchs' former residence. Dellarobia researched Preston's young friend's town in Mexico and found that forestry was involved. Clear-cutting the mountainside above the town caused the mudslide and flooding when heavy rain came (137-138). Like butterflies, Josephina's family, a minority in Tennessee, was uprooted. The mudslide devastated homes. Deforesting the mountain affected humans, plants, and butterflies. Josefina's family and butterflies must move.

This internet search shows Josefina's neighborhood's mudslide devastation. Dellarobia "had to switch off the computer" before Preston could absorb what they saw. She assured him it was far away (137-138). Dellarobia knows about deforestation, but she uses the same rhetoric

to protect her son. Murphy recognises the language she uses to comfort Preston because Dellarobia defends herself when Cub uses it. Murphy writes:

When Dellarobia worry about monarchs losing their home, Cub says, "There's always somewhere else to go" (172). Dellarobia fumes, "What if there was no other place?" (175). She wants to leave her marriage and realises that climate change has affected every place. Escape dreams promise psychological, economic, or ecological business as usual in a different area, delaying necessary action. (159)

She initially reassures Preston that everything will be fine, but she eventually realises that it won't. Dellarobia should consider introducing Preston to the idea that the world is unhealthy, despite Preston's age.

Murphy also addresses Bear's decision-making. Murphy says, "This clear-cutting is only one example of short-term and short-sighted economic fixes." It also shows how the consumerist society in which individuals live can persuade them to make decisions that harm their long-term interests and the health of their human communities, ecoregional communities, and the biosphere (159). Murphy's view resembles Kingsolver's of legislators who uphold Appalachian farmers' exploitative language. The clear-cutting may prevent this loan collection, but if the weather remains unpredictable and violent, the farm's difficulties will persist.

The examined extratextual and intratextual climate change issues and their effects on human and nonhuman ecologies and cultures. Logging choices come from

the family patriarch. Dellarobia must accept the ruling or move. Moving would simply shield Dellarobia from Bear's will. Dellarobia fights her culture's patriarchal power mechanisms in this segment. Ecofeminist analysis of Dellarobia's relationship with nature and her new identity, which is at least partially shaped by a symbiotic view of nature, informs the chapter.

Wagner-Martin portrays Dellarobia's transition after regaining self-awareness in Barbara Kingsolver's *World: Nature, Art, and the 21st Century* (7). Her perspective and encounters with monarch butterfly biologists gave her confidence and independence. "And for Dellarobia's part, accepting the inevitable starts to have a certain allure; her disposition begins to shift from romantic to nearly objective," Wagner-Martin says (7). Nature is not a god that affects humans. Aliens are symbiotic with humans and respond to anthropocentric actions. Byron's researchers in Tennessee saw butterflies without the natives' religious or emotional fervour.

People dropped from trees like insects, trembling and dying slowly. Dellarobia wondered whether this was a butterfly funeral, but these scientists wouldn't know. They were working with tape measures, plastic sheeting, waxed-paper envelope boxes, and other little tools she couldn't name. Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*. (139)

Scientists consider the loss of butterflies' native habitat and their new migratory routes ordinary, even though they are aware of the possible effects on butterfly and human life. Dellarobia just

started thinking scientifically. Thus, the shift from romantic to objective coincides with the tragedy of the monarch's new Tennessee palace. Dellarobia originally thinks the monarch butterflies' orange is God's burning bush for her lost soul. The updated migration patterns become a chaotic, desperate struggle for survival and a new home. She transcends human exceptionalism by viewing the tragedy through the butterflies' eyes. Dellarobia increasingly understands the scientists' ecological perspective, especially Byron's. "She started seeing Byron's "complex system Not an orange journey over a continent or stones falling from a box, as she had imagined. As it moved, cells ruptured and regenerated. She felt embarrassed by the shocking vision". (146)

Wagner-Martin notes Dellarobia's changing outlook. Dellarobia views monarch migration as a box of marbles. She now sees butterflies as cells and a living flow with individual and collective agency. She opposes him since the butterflies were affecting her thinking and making Bear angry. "These butterflies belonged to her." She found them and showed her son. She valued them above anything else. She was ready to fight her family's men with her 100-pound physique (149). Her resolve builds throughout the story, and she resents those who aren't learning about consequences. Dovey doesn't understand Dellarobia's flying path, but she supports her. "That's female," Dovey says. Flying is risk-free for kids and adults. "No, Dovey, it's a global phenomenon," Dellarobia says. "It's just how well you can see the crash landing" (190). They misinterpret their acts

as opposing the Turnbow family, leaving Cub, and changing the butterfly tragedy. Doveyprioritises Dellarobia's well-being over the monarchy. Interanimity implies a cosmic cause-and-effect link. Dellarobia's new ecological philosophy recognises human-nonhuman interconnectedness and emphasises cause and effect and consequences.

Flight Behavior's symbolism and behaviour mirror Dellarobia's increasingly anti-patriarchal mindset. Dellarobia's anti-anthropocentric mindset will be shown by further comparisons to the story's nonhumans. She represents varied land reactions rather than extraterrestrial things. She rejects Bear Turnbow's patriarchal, myopic acts and Cub's constrained marriage, and she changes her view of the land from Turnbow property to a true ecology with human and nonhuman links.

She rebels against the Turnbow men's limits on her personal contacts and learns more about animals, especially the butterflies and sheep on the farm. She prepares for difficult births by studying sheep care. "Black, weirdly flat against the snow, and immobile within its translucent sac: a little sheep child." The ewe left and sniffed the snow for grazing (Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*, 415). Hester aborted her first pregnancy, and Dellarobia's child died. The ewe rejects the lamb similarly. "Without ever entirely regaining her equilibrium, [Dellarobia] returned to the puddle of lamb, yelling at the mother who stood blandly munching." Far from this incident that never happened" (415). *Flight Behavior* characters can interpret this botched delivery in several ways.

Dellarobia saves the lamb but not her child. The lamb struggling to breathe symbolises the unstable world disbelieving humans have left her. The lamb symbolises altered monarch flight pathways and other potential worldwide environmental disasters, and the sheep who "stood blandly chewing...away from this thing that had certainly not happened to her" represent humans who refuse to admit they are destroying their planet (415). The novel has a real lamb. Remembering the lamb shows Dellarobia's newfound affinity to nature. The lamb moves her more than Cub, who must also lament the stillborn infant, did in Dellarobia. Dellarobia and *Flight Behavior* ended this thesis since she reflects ecofeminism's hope.

Dellarobia hopes for a better world and planet (as a synonym for humans and nonhumans collectively) that we treat honestly and damage as little as possible and respect. *Flight Behavior's* ending is unclear but hopeful, suggesting that things can still improve. Wagner-Martin: "The reader may be confused if they think the story is about a woman's maturation through education and life experiences: Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* doesn't reveal Dellarobia's fate. It doesn't explain how much she loves college studies or how much she can influence her smart little son Preston. Barbara Kingsolver".(3)

Dellarobia's decisions offer hope, but the story doesn't deliver. The open-ended story raises more questions than it answers. "The sky was too bright and the earth so shaky that she could not gaze aloft for very long," the novel concludes. Instead, she focused on wingtip reflections on the

water, a combination of flame and flood. They flew to a new realm above the globe's lake and white mountains (433). Merging is crucial. Merging shows Dellarobia sandwiched between the bright sky and unstable earth. Wagner-Martin says the blending represents a revitalised human-nature relationship. Wagner-Martin claims, "The novels' two ending paragraphs symbolise Kingsolver's desire to push the natural world to become vital to the human one, a feat that is done without Dellarobia's name ever being mentioned." (3). Wagner-comments Martin's on the merging of nature and humanity echo the novel's final themes of ambiguity and optimism. This one truth makes the book successful, optimistic, and ecofeminist in its melding of human and nonhuman identities. Optimism is what readers should take away from the two novels reviewed in this thesis. Understanding how people are connected to everything on Earth will help us revive the planet and stop exploiting people, animals, and nature for profit and pleasure.

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