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## Woman and Climate Change in Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*

**Dr T Eswar Rao**

Assistant Professor

P G Dept of English

Berhampur University, Bhanja Bihar

Ganjam, Odisha, India

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### Abstract

In today's modern world, climate change is the most pressing important issue that mankind has to deal with. Backed with scientific evidences, there is no denying in the fact that mankind's sustainability will be largely dictated by its catastrophic or soothing effects. To take the harsh realities of climate changes head on, every single species on this very earth should put forward its foot forward. It is here where we, the human race in general, must embrace the glaring truths of the day around us and exercise our democratic rights to make a difference in the physical world we live in. And in this noble sphere of activities, women can't lag behind others. Women also have the knowledge and understanding of what is required to be acquired to challenge the changing environmental circumstances in order to determine practical solutions. But, in the face of the prevailing social environment, they remain a largely untapped resource due to existing biases, including restricted land rights, financial resources and limited access to decision making due to under representation. In Barbara's *Flight Behaviour*, Dellarobia, the female protagonist is deprived of the proper knowledge about the climate change which misleads her to interpret the Monarch butterflies as a vision of glory. But, later when she learns the fact, she shows her utmost enthusiasm to carry forward her learning. She even becomes lab assistant of Ovid, a scientist tracking the flight behaviour of monarch butterflies. At the end of the novel, Dellarobia plans to go back to college and move away from the farm along with her children. This paper explores the practical and effective climate change mitigation measures, and unleashes the knowledge and capabilities of women.

**Keywords-** Climate Change, Sustainability, Women's Role, Monarch Butterflies

### Introduction

Carolyn Kormann suggests that climate change, a 'far-reaching, fundamental transformation,' raises 'a full array of big, important issues for fiction to take on'. In the 21st century, a new genre of Anglophone fiction has emerged—the climate change novel, often abbreviated as "cli-fi."

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Many successful authors of literary fiction, such as Margaret Atwood, Paolo Bacigalupi, T. C. Boyle, Michael Crichton, Ian McEwan, Amitav Ghosh, Barbara Kingsolver, Ursula Le Guin, Lydia Millet, David Mitchell, Ruth Ozeki, Nathaniel Rich, Kim Stanley Robinson, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Marcel Theroux, have contributed to this new genre's efforts to imagine the causes, effects, and feeling of global warming. Together, their work pulls the issue-oriented and didactic approach of activist fiction into contact with the intensive description and site specificity of Romantic nature writing. Cli-fi knits these tendencies together into a description of the effects of a dramatic change in the Earth's climate on a particular location and a vision of the options available to a population seeking to adapt to or mitigate those effects. *Flight Behaviour* is Kingsolver's exemplar creation that embodies her unique way of converting experiences into insights, i.e. science through fiction. *Flight Behavior* centers on the environment and how climate change has impacted the earth and continues to cause devastation and often unpredictable changes. Yet at the same time, the novel presents the clash between protecting the environment and carving out a livelihood for individuals. While this particular stand of trees is saved in the end, and not logged, not all financial pits are so seamlessly filled outside the novel. He asks, 'Is the human imagination really so depressingly enclosed, able to be captivated only by immediate images of itself? (Timothy Clark 179). Individuals around the globe struggle with making ends meet while sacrificing the environment, while millions of others make choices to sacrifice the environment without a second thought or need to support themselves or their families.

Global warming is the most critical and controversial issue focusing the world in the twenty first century. Global warming is the term used to describe a gradual increase in the average temperature of the Earth's atmosphere, a change that is believed to be permanently changing the earth's climate. In 1896, scientists concluded that human activity contributed to the effect, warming the planet further. And yet here we find ourselves in 2020 still wrestling with manmade climate change like it's a new phenomenon. The greatest challenge woman and climate change science today is not understanding the causes and consequences of climate change, nor even knowing how to moderate those causes and mitigate the consequences. One tool for coming to terms with climate change and perhaps conceiving ways to personally adapt to the new realities- might be one of our oldest human practices: storytelling. Story telling has the power to give climate change a human focus by translating complex and evolving scientific concepts into tales reimagining human interactions with the world. The new genre Cli-fi or Climate Change Fiction or Climate Fiction deals with climate change and global warming. Not necessarily speculative in nature, works of Cli-fi takes place in the world as we know it or in the near future. The term Cli-fi is popularized by journalist and climate change activist Dann Bloom. Dann Bloom came up with the word "Cli-fi", hoping to convert the dull phrase climate fiction into something compelling. He wanted to come up with a catchy buzz word to raise awareness

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about global warming. According to Dann Bloom a central function of the climate novel is to examine the climate change debate at an emotional level.

Kesey has inverted the doctor-nurse relationship usually found in asylums at the time, where the women in care roles "must defer to the male scientific authority" (Carlson 129), *Flight Behavior* is a brilliant and suspenseful novel set in present day Appalachia; a breathtaking parable of catastrophe and denial that explores how the complexities we inevitably encounter in life lead us to believe in our particular chosen truths. Kingsolver's riveting story concerns a young wife and mother on a failing farm in rural Tennessee who experiences something she cannot explain, and how her discovery energizes various competing factions—religious leaders, climate scientists, environmentalists, politicians—trapping her in the center of the conflict and ultimately opening up her world

*Flight Behavior* takes on one of the most contentious subjects of our time: climate change. With a deft and versatile empathy Kingsolver dissects the motives that drive denial and belief in a precarious world. Her works often focuses on topics such as social justice, biodiversity, and the interaction between humans and their communities and their environments. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* is a successful realist example of Cli-fi that confronts climate change directly. It explores environmental themes and highlights the potential effects of global warming on the Monarch butterflies. The novel engages to weave social and environmental factors together to arrive at a comprehensive view of climate change. It focuses on the effect of climate change on a single butterfly species; yet this refined scope does not resist the narrative it quickly become apparent how this event is related to the wider human and nonhuman community. Kingsolver made clear in an interview, her intention to alert the public to the risks posed by climate change through her writings. By personalizing the experience of global warming and dramatizing its consequences she seek to bring it alive and help readers to image the future.

*Flight Behavior* is a novel about climate change and class differences, set among rural Appalachia and millions of monarch butterflies. While going to meet a man for a fling, dissatisfied wife and mother Dellarobia discovers the entire North American population of monarchs has descended upon her mountain. What she sees astonishes her and jolts her way of thinking, and after looking at photos online, I can't feel otherwise. Monarchs gather in enormous clumps, like grapes, among trees, and the site is truly spectacular.

From there, Dellarobia explores her feelings about the monarchs, her marriage, her children, and her dreams, with those around her. Her father-in-law wants to log the mountain for money. Her mother-in-law never seems to approve of Dellarobia's. Her husband, Cub, is kind but slow and timid. Scientist Ovid Bryon, who arrives to study the butterflies, is the first to listen to her and teach her. But Byron is also in a world completely different than her own.

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Through the lens of Dellarobia's growth, the book is very much a treatise on the danger of climate change. Its message is important and broken down simply, though occasionally the reductive analogies can come off as patronizing.

There's also strong element of preaching to the choir as I doubt many climate change deniers will be reading it. However, I did like that Kingsolver takes some time to explain the way in which climate change has absurdly become a Democrats vs. Republicans issue and how something that virtually all scientists agree on is framed in the media as "the debate over climate change."

While I certainly agree with everything Kingsolver argues about the danger we are causing our planet, I found the exploration of class issues more engrossing within the book itself. Where the book could have gone simplistic the kind, educated professor helps the illiterate downtrodden *or* the snooty urban elite destroying the poor's pure simplicity there's instead nuance. For example, Byron becomes angry that the local high school is uninterested in sending student volunteers to learn and study the butterflies. After all, it's a great opportunity to see science in action and build valuable skills. But the school only wants to know if it pays minimum wage because, truthfully, the students aren't going into science fields and they aren't going to college. A mindless minimum wage job is more useful. But, at the heart of the novel is Dellarobia, whose quest to find meaning and purpose in her life centers the story. The ending's pretty optimistic, but not outside the realm of possibility.

The story is told through the eyes of Dellarobia Turnbow, a young mother with a yearning for something more in life. *Flight Behaviour* links Dellarobia's desire to escape grinding poverty and disappointing marriage to the butterflies' evens more desperate escape from a habitat no longer suitable for their biological requirements *Flight Behaviour* is Kingsolver's exemplar creation that embodies her unique way of converting experiences into insights, i.e. science through fiction. She dares to tear the logging climate convictions in both real and fictional world. Kingsolver's extreme concern for the natural world is quiet apparent in her novels where she blows so much life to the natural world which makes one feel nature as one among the chief characters in her literary creation. *Flight Behavior* visualizes one such spectacle at the arrival of monarch butterflies in the rural Tennessee as "Unearthly beauty a vision of glory. The butterflies in the novel are not just meant for their symbolic presence but to explicitly expose the human over nature dominance. *Flight behavior* gets readers to empathize with a believable protagonist trying to understand the topic of climate change. Dellarobia Turnbow, the central figure, is a farmer's wife in the southern Appalachians. A bright and attractive 28-year-old with a gentle, passive and unambitious husband, she is trapped in claustrophobic rural poverty and the drudgery of life as a mother of two small children. Breaking out in desperation from her unfulfilling everyday existence, she is on her way to an illicit assignation with a young telegraph engineer in a hunting hut on the mountainside above the farm. The would-be adulterer is stopped

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in her tracks by the sight of a forested valley seemingly alight with a cold orange flame. Dellarobia's experience is described in terms bordering on the miraculous: The forest blazed with its own internal flame.

The novel deals with a major issue, the ignorance of climate change and lack of eco-centric vision. By locating the narrative within a small close-knit community, Kingsolver is more able to show the disruptive effects of an ecological event. Climate change skepticism underpins the majority of this community. King solver catalyzes the major conflict of the novel, that is, the lack of eco-centric vision among humans. Everyone in Flight Behavior from religious fundamentalists to the rating conscious media frames the phenomenon, arrival of the Monarch butterflies, to suit their own interests. The residence of the Feather Town considers the arrival of the Monarch butterflies as a rebirth of Lord, or a symbol of resurrection. Whereas to some of them are the objects of annoyance. To Bear and Hester Turnbow, Dellarobia's in-laws, the butterflies are means to allure tourists and eco-sights seers through which they can gather money to pay their debts. To the media people like Tina Ultner, the butterflies meant nothing but the current talk of town with which they can promote their channel and extend their advertisements. Kingsolver presents the most important issue, lack of knowledge of climate change in the behavior of the characters. The lack of seriousness in conserving the nature can be seen in Bear Town. Bear Town irresistibly logs and destroys the trees for him considered the forest as "just trees" and not "gold mines" to be preserved, but keeps cursing the failed rain without bothering to think about the significance of the woods for rain. Apart from that he had also planned to wipe out the over wintering Monarchs that stands in between the logging plan using DDT. As a biologist herself, Kingsolver introduces Ovid Byron, a scientist, who arrives at the town to investigate about the miracle (Monarch butterflies), as her mouth piece or recount the genuine truths of the real world like global warming. Flight Behaviour presents a particularly detailed portrait of climate denial. Kingsolver pulls no punches in exposing the "blindness" of Appalachian farmers and small town communities in America's Bible belt to the dangers of anthropogenic global warming. She nevertheless depicts their mental world with sympathy and understanding. Political and commercial interests are present in the background, but rather than making the machinations of lobby groups responsible for environmental apathy, or even the media, she focuses on the everyday worries of people without higher education, bordering on poverty. Kingsolver makes extensive use of analogy as a structuring device in the novel. Blindness to environmental change, referred to as "looking without seeing", is paralleled by Dellarobia's suppression of her grief over the loss of her first pregnancy, her mother-in-law's life of quiet desperation and denial (which as we learn at the end of the book derives from having had to give her first, illegitimate child up for adoption in order to be accepted by her husband), and public refusal to face up to the consequences of smoking. "I think people are scared to face up to a bad outcome. Butterflies are of course the central symbol in the novel. *Flight Behaviour*

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celebrates the beauty of the Monarch species (*Danaus plexippus*) and expresses admiration for the extraordinary intricacy and sophistication of the instincts which enable it to migrate annually over thousands of miles between Mexico and Canada. The individual butterflies die on average after 6 weeks, but they pass on their genes to descendants, who complete the journey northwards. Others again fly back south and congregate at their winter gathering place in Mexican Angangueo. In the first instance, the bright orange butterflies, which are reproduced (albeit in abstract form, as small golden leaf shapes swarming above bare treetops) on the book's dustcover, symbolize the fragile, transient beauty of nature and the risk from global warming. However, their association in folk belief with the souls of dead children is also referred to at several points. The threat to their survival thus serves as a poignant reminder of the fate of future human generations facing the consequences of climate change. In the final pages of *Flight Behaviour*, the belated arrival of spring triggers a snowmelt which engulfs Dellarobia's home, in a scene reminiscent of the Biblical flood, suggesting divine punishment. However, the onset of the exodus of the surviving butterflies merges flood and flame in a reprise of the opening scene of the book, suggesting that violent change may also bring rebirth. In the analysis of *Flight Behaviour*, literary critic Axel Goodbody notes that the story and particular its ending move away from apocalyptic rhetoric and instead resemble more "a narrative of an individual's awakening to environmental risks and simultaneous realization of the potential as an active member of society". As Dellarobia invents herself a new life leaving her unhappy marriage and going to university and the butterflies are flying off to find new grounds, geographical as well as socio cultural borders are crossed and new habitats created. It is then not too late to envision better and more sustainable new earths.

The novel ends with Dellarobia deciding that, yes, she has married the wrong man, so she decides to get a divorce, move out of town, and go back to school. She breaks this to her son by 1) telling him she has some exciting news 2) sharing said news i.e. that she's moving away and going back to school but he'll still be able to see her 3) justifying her decision by comparing it to crapping the bed, and 4) withholding what is essentially her going away gift, an iPhone, until her young son admits that things will never be the same. Lest this sounds like an exaggeration, here's the passage:

"What if I want everything to stay how it is?" he asked.

"Oh, man, that's the bite. Grown-ups want that too. Honestly! That's what makes them crap the bed and stay in it, I'm not even kidding."

His eyes scooted away from hers, avoiding the verdict.

"It won't ever go back to the way it was, Preston. You have to say that right now, okay? Just say it and I'll give you the pod-thing."

He glanced over at her, making sure, and said it. "It won't ever go back to how it was."

"Okay" She handed it over. "You're the man."



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The high-school language ("Oh, man", "I'm not even kidding") seems wildly inappropriate for breaking world-shattering news to your child. This section so impacted the view of Dellarobia that it retroactively tainted the rest of the book. The story begins with her about to make a selfish mistake, and ends with her selfishly upending everyone's lives and forcing them to accept it whether they like it or not. The very end comes out of nowhere, and feels like a cosmic attempt to validate Dellarobia's choice, but her treatment of her child and husband had already wrecked her character by then. May be this is just a personal bias, nobody knows. All one can say is that, while it has its strong points, I ultimately didn't enjoy *Flight Behavior* that much, even though I really wanted to.

### Conclusion

The open end of the novel is Kingsolver's way of offering a choice whether to encounter a disaster or to choose flight at last. Presenting the dire circumstances of the novel as such, Kingsolver tries to deploy second thoughts to seek an immediate change that needs to be implemented in a real world. *Flight Behaviour* voices the need for a consciousness the preservation of natural world. The blend of science and creativity in the novel blatantly documents how human beings welcome their own devastation by causing continuous threats to natural world. The novel also stresses on the need for reconstruction harmony between the human and non-human world so as to bring back the harmony on Earth. Kingsolver merges both the scientific and ecological facts in her novel one after the other and reinstates Barry Commoner's first law of ecology that "everything is connected to everything else" and to an extreme she provides alternative perspective that even science is possible through fiction. The great gift of literature is its ability to provoke empathy across distant spaces, and also distant times. This is one of the reasons why Cli-fi or Climate Change Fiction is important. Cli-fi is more relevant in the contemporary society. The genre is helpful in waking up people and serving as alarm bell for the issue of climate change and dangers of global warming. The emotional Cli-fi narratives move people to action for more effectively than a string of scientific data projection. Cli-fi uses real scientific data to translate climate change from the abstract to the cultural, enabling readers to experience threats and effects they might be expected to encounter across their own life. Literature can play a part in the process of creating awareness; it is perhaps above all in helping the public imagine climate change and related risks. Novelists retrieve, interrogate, and experiment with the assembly of cultural tools relevant to debates on climate change risk, thereby enhancing their readers' competence in facing the challenge it poses. Globalization has magnified the challenge of maintaining a sense of citizenship, empowerment, and commitment to a moral community. The narratives evoke consciousness about the complex issue of climate change and it emphasizes an understanding and togetherness between the human and non-human world is important to survive on Earth. The genre has an emotional appeal and it makes us think about the human behavior that exploit earth and natural resources for selfish motives and the

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human actions like fossil fuel burning, deforestation and coral burning affect the environment. These novels evoke awareness about these issues and make us think that, 'it is time to change our attitude towards nature' and also provide a hope that it is not too late and we can save our environment by changing the mode of approaches to environment.

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