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AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *FLIGHT BEHAVIOUR*

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Abstract

*The present research article offers an ecocritical reading of Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Flight Behaviour*, examining how the novel represents climate change as a lived, social, and ethical experience rather than a distant scientific phenomenon. Set in a rural Appalachian community, the narrative centres on Dellarobia Turnbow, whose encounter with a displaced population of monarch butterflies becomes a catalyst for environmental awareness and moral awakening. Drawing on ecocritical theory and climate fiction studies, the article explores the interconnected roles of nature, science, religion, media, gender and community in shaping responses to climate change. It argues that Kingsolver challenges dominant scientific and media narratives by embedding climate crisis within everyday life, emotional experience and social inequality. The novel highlights the difficulty of communicating climate knowledge, critiques the spectacle-driven nature of media representation, and foregrounds women's experiential knowledge as a crucial form of environmental agency. Finally, this research article contends that the novel *Flight Behaviour* functions as an important work of climate fiction that fosters ecological consciousness, ethical responsibility, and empathy, demonstrating literature's vital role in responding to the climate crisis.*

Keywords

Ecocriticism, Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi), Climate Change, Environmental Ethics, Barbara Kingsolver, Flight Behaviour, Science and Society, Gender and Environment, Media Representation, Social Experience of Climate Change, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Climate change has emerged as one of the most urgent challenges of the twenty-first century, affecting not only the natural world but also human societies, cultures and moral systems. Literature has responded to this crisis by developing new forms of environmental storytelling that attempt to make climate change emotionally visible and ethically meaningful. Ecocriticism, as a literary approach, examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment and explores how texts represent nature, ecological crises, and human responsibility. Within this critical framework, Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Flight Behaviour* (2012) stands out as a significant example of contemporary climate fiction.

The novel *Flight Behaviour* addresses climate change not through distant disasters or futuristic settings, but through the everyday life of a rural Appalachian community. The novel centres on Dellarobia Turnbow, a young woman living in economic hardship, whose life changes



when she discovers a massive population of monarch butterflies that have migrated to Tennessee due to climate disruption. This ecological event becomes the foundation for a broader exploration of science, religion, media, gender, and social responsibility.

This research article offers an ecocritical reading of *Flight Behaviour*, arguing that Kingsolver presents climate change as a lived, social and ethical experience rather than a purely scientific phenomenon. By grounding global environmental crisis in local and personal contexts, the novel challenges readers to recognize climate change as a human issue that demands moral engagement. The article examines how the present novel represents nature, scientific knowledge, belief systems, media narratives, gendered experience and community response, demonstrating that ecological awareness emerges through dialogue, conflict, and emotional awakening.

Synopsis of the Novel in Brief:

Flight Behaviour is a climate fiction novel set in a poor rural community in the Appalachian region of Tennessee. The story centres on Dellarobia Turnbow, a young woman who feels trapped by poverty, an early marriage, and limited choices. Her life takes an unexpected turn when she discovers a vast number of monarch butterflies covering the trees on a nearby mountain. What first appears to her as a mysterious and almost spiritual sight soon becomes the central event of the novel.

Scientists later explain that the butterflies have migrated to this unfamiliar location because climate change has disrupted their normal migration route to Mexico. Instead of being a miracle, the butterflies' presence signals a serious ecological crisis that threatens their survival. As researchers arrive to study the phenomenon, the quiet rural area is suddenly exposed to national and international attention through the media.

The novel explores how different groups respond to this environmental event. Some local people interpret the butterflies through religious belief, while others remain skeptical of scientific explanations. Media coverage often turns the crisis into a spectacle rather than addressing its seriousness. Through her growing involvement with the scientific team, Dellarobia gains education and awareness, challenging her earlier beliefs and social limitations.

Alongside the environmental narrative, the novel also focuses on Dellarobia's personal growth. As she learns about climate change, she begins to question her role as a wife, mother, and member of her community. By the end of the novel, *Flight Behaviour* highlights the deep connection between environmental crisis and human life, presenting climate change as a social, ethical, and emotional issue that demands awareness and responsibility.

Ecocriticism and Climate Fiction: A Brief Framework:

Ecocriticism emerged in the late twentieth century as a response to growing environmental concerns and seeks to analyze how literature shapes and reflects human relationships with nature. Early ecocritical studies focused on nature writing and wilderness narratives, but contemporary ecocriticism has expanded to include urban environments, climate change, environmental justice, and post human ethics.

Climate fiction, often referred to as "cli-fi," is a literary genre that directly engages with climate change and its consequences. Unlike scientific reports, climate fiction works through narrative, character, and emotion to make abstract data meaningful. As Lawrence Buell argues, environmental literature has the power to reshape ethical imagination by connecting ecological harm with human values and responsibilities. He states that "environmental crisis is fundamentally a crisis of imagination" (Buell, 2).

Flight Behaviour fits firmly within this tradition. Kingsolver does not present climate change as a spectacular apocalypse but as a slow, unsettling disruption of ordinary life. This

approach aligns with ecocritical emphasis on relational thinking, which views humans and nonhuman nature as deeply interconnected.

Nature as a Speaking Presence:

One of the most striking features of *Flight Behaviour* is its portrayal of nature as an active and communicative presence. The monarch butterflies are not merely background scenery; they function as symbols of ecological imbalance and as messengers of environmental truth. Their unexpected migration signals that the natural world is responding to human-induced climate change.

When Dellarobia first encounters the butterflies, the experience is described in vivid, almost spiritual language. Nature appears alive and responsive, demanding attention. Later in the novel, the butterfly forest is described as follows, “This butterfly forest was a great, quiet, breathing beast. Monarchs covered the trunks like orange fish scales... He had confessed these were not scientific thoughts” (Kingsolver, 438).

This passage reflects the blending of emotional, spiritual, and scientific responses to environmental change. The butterflies evoke wonder and grief at the same time, showing that ecological awareness is not purely rational. Kingsolver suggests that nature “speaks” through disruption, beauty, and loss, and humans must learn how to listen.

Science and the Challenge of Climate Knowledge:

Science plays a central role in *Flight Behaviour*, particularly through the character of Ovid Byron, an entomologist studying the monarchs. Ovid represents scientific authority and global climate knowledge, yet he struggles to communicate the seriousness of the crisis to the local community. This difficulty highlights a key ecocritical concern: the gap between scientific understanding and public awareness.

Kingsolver portrays science as necessary but insufficient on its own. Scientific facts do not automatically produce ethical action. Instead, knowledge must be translated into human terms. Dellarobia’s gradual education illustrates this process. She learns that climate change is not a distant problem but a global system in which her own life is entangled.

The novel, thus, critiques the idea that ignorance is the main barrier to climate action. Social identity, belief systems, and economic insecurity also shape how people respond to scientific information. Kingsolver shows that climate denial is often rooted in fear and powerlessness rather than simple lack of knowledge.

Religion and Environmental Meaning:

Religion is another powerful force shaping environmental awareness in the novel. In Dellarobia’s community, religious belief provides comfort and moral structure. Some church members interpret the butterflies as divine signs or miracles, reinforcing faith-based explanations for environmental events.

Kingsolver treats religion with sensitivity, recognizing its social importance, but also exposes its limitations. When climate change is understood solely as God’s will, human responsibility is weakened. Dellarobia’s inner conflict reflects this tension between faith and scientific explanation.

Rather than presenting science and religion as enemies, *Flight Behaviour* suggests the possibility of ethical dialogue between them. Environmental responsibility, the novel implies, requires moral reflection as well as empirical knowledge.

Media, Spectacle and Public Perception:

Media coverage transforms the monarch butterflies into a spectacle, attracting journalists and



tourists. This attention brings visibility to the crisis but also distorts its meaning. The media prefers dramatic images and simplified narratives over complex scientific explanation. Kingsolver critiques this process by showing how media representation reduces climate change to a temporary story rather than a permanent condition. The community becomes famous, but understanding does not deepen. Climate change becomes entertainment rather than responsibility. Environmental critic Bill McKibben addresses this problem when he observes, “We live in a world where climate change is covered as news, not as the defining condition of our time” (McKibben, 18). This insight helps explain why public concern often fades when media attention moves elsewhere. *Flight Behaviour* exposes the limits of spectacle-based awareness.

Gender and Environmental Agency:

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping environmental agency in the novel. Dellarobia’s position as a rural woman limits her power, education, and voice. Yet it is precisely her marginal position that allows her to perceive environmental change with clarity and emotional depth. Kingsolver challenges traditional models of environmental leadership by presenting a female protagonist whose agency develops through learning, care, and ethical reflection rather than authority or expertise. Dellarobia’s journey suggests that environmental awareness often begins in private spaces—homes, bodies, emotions—before it enters public discourse.

The novel, thus, aligns with ecofeminist ideas that connect environmental exploitation with gender inequality. By empowering Dellarobia’s voice, Kingsolver emphasizes the importance of including women’s experiences in climate conversations.

Climate Change as a Social Experience:

One of the novel’s most important contributions is its portrayal of climate change as a social experience. Environmental disruption affects families, communities, education systems and emotional life. Climate anxiety is shared, even when it is not openly discussed. Children learn about environmental damage in school, sometimes understanding its seriousness more clearly than adults. In one scene, environmental loss is explained in simple terms: “Animals losing their homes, because of people being a bit careless” (Kingsolver, 490–91).

This moment highlights how climate awareness is transmitted socially and morally, not just scientifically. Kingsolver shows that climate change exposes social inequality, as poor rural communities face greater risks with fewer resources.

Environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht describes this shared distress as a collective emotional condition, arguing that environmental loss produces, “a new form of psychological stress rooted in ecological change” (Albrecht, 45). This concept helps explain the quiet anxiety that runs throughout the novel.

Ethical Responsibility and Ecocritical Vision:

At its core, *Flight Behaviour* is a novel about ethical responsibility. Kingsolver asks difficult questions: What do humans owe the natural world? How should individuals respond to global crises they did not cause? Who bears responsibility for environmental damage?

Through Dellarobia’s moral awakening, the novel suggests that responsibility begins with awareness and empathy. Climate change demands collective action, but it also requires individual ethical transformation.

Lawrence Buell emphasizes the moral role of environmental literature when he writes that literature can “reorient values by reconnecting human stories with ecological realities” (Buell, 7). *Flight Behaviour* achieves this by linking personal growth with planetary crisis.

Conclusion:



An ecocritical reading of *Flight Behaviour* reveals Barbara Kingsolver's novel as a powerful and necessary contribution to contemporary climate fiction. By embedding climate change within the lived experience of a rural community, the novel transforms an abstract global crisis into a human story marked by struggle, learning and ethical awakening. The analysis has shown that *Flight Behaviour* integrates science, religion, media, gender, and social life into a unified environmental narrative. Kingsolver does not offer simple solutions but invites readers to confront complexity, uncertainty, and responsibility. Nature, in the novel, speaks through disruption and beauty, demanding attention and care. Finally, *Flight Behaviour* argues that climate change is not only an environmental problem but also a cultural and moral one. Through empathy, dialogue and imagination, literature can help readers recognize their place within a fragile ecological system. In this sense, Kingsolver's novel performs one of the most important functions of ecocritical writing: it teaches us how to listen when nature speaks.

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