

**The Angle of Ecocritics:  
The Study of Environment and the Narrative Situation in  
*Flight Behavior***

**G. Rajadivya, Ph.D. Research Scholar  
Dr. R. Palanivel, Research Supervisor**

=====  
**Abstract**

Barbara Kingsolver is an award-winning author whose books are not only well-known in the United States but have also been translated into various languages. Born on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1955. Barbara Kingsolver is one of the numerous prominent Southern writers who have deals with to describe the county vibrantly and in a fascinating approach to their readers. In her novels, Kingsolver demonstrates her powerful correlation to the areas that she writes down about, which is why natural world and the environmental surroundings play essential roles in her novels. *Flight Behavior* is Kingsolver's latest novel, which was published in 2012. The foremost incident in the story is that millions of Monarch butterflies decided a valley in Tennessee to hibernating as an alternative of roaming to their natural places in Mexico. It must be elucidated that these actions are fantasy and that, until now, this has not happened in real world. This novel is categorized by those who reject or resist the reality that climate change is factual and that it influences their lives. It is a significant novel which concentrates on dissimilar restricted as well as world-wide ecological problems. Its major apprehension is climate change and its root causes, which are established throughout a detailed, yet imaginary instance, namely an alteration in the *flight behavior* of the Monarch butterflies.

**Keywords:** Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*, Ecocritics, Nature, Environment, butterfly, climate change.

*Flight Behavior* articulates Kingsolver's immense attention in the environment and the interdependence of persons and their surroundings. Kingsolver's scholarly knowledge about biology and ecology, achieved during her years of study and research at various universities, agrees her to portray biological progression, for instance, the immigration of the Monarch butterflies, in enormous feature, and give her readers with biological awareness that is based on scientific facts. Her personal view and thinking concerning the plentiful ecological interest's deals with by her are characterized by the major characters, while other characters are likely to symbolize more universal way of life and statements.

Ecocritical literature and science appear to be stalwartly associated for the reason that they split parallel aims. Heise disputes that “the relationship between modern environmentalist thought and the sciences has always been fraught with contradictions, paradoxes, and reversals” (Heise, p.22). On the individual hand, science is supposed to present resolutions for contemporary troubles but, alternatively, science is analyzed as contributing to the whispered struggles because the thought of that humans stand up aside from the respite of the natural world and have the aptitude, the accurate, and possibly still the responsibility to discover and reform it have guided to our cooperative irony of ecological difficulty, our ignoring of other living beings’ wants and privileges, and in excess of evaluation of our individual understanding and ability. (Heise, pp. 22, 23)

Kingsolver also look as if to be concerns with the question of how people interrelate with the environment and how people exercise their power over the environment, for instance cultivating methods or the use of pesticides. The connection between scientists and cultural critics has been an unsure one, having also changed over the past few decades. One of the essential and critical questions posed in this context was as to whether nature was only a constructed concept, and, if so, by whom and how the construction had been influenced (Heise, p. 23). Heise observes that the confidence in science has revisited in the last many years and that “large sectors of the environmentalist movement once again rely on science to provide the ethical guidelines for how-to live-in nature” (Heise, p. 24, 25).

Frequenting problems and themes are, for example, “environmental toxins and their often subtle but destructive impacts on the human body”, the dealing of endanger species and, in an exacting in the last two decades, typical weather change and its castigations (Heise, p. 26-28). This tendency can also be pragmatic in Kingsolver’s novels, which we will now be analyzing in better background.

*Flight Behavior* is Kingsolver’s most new book and formerly yet again an incredibly essential novel which deals with different home as well as universal environmental problems. Its foremost concern is climate change and its effects, which are established through a detailed, yet fictional example, which is an alteration in the flight behavior of the Monarch butterflies.

Monarch butterflies are best known for their charming mass migration; every year they cross about 3.800 kilometres from the south of Canada to California and Mexico to hibernation, (National Geographic, *Monarch Butterfly*). In *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver portrayed a fictional situation in which the Monarchs do not move to their usual winter places but dwell in Tennessee as an alternative – a locality where the winters are much too freezing for them, and certainly would endanger their continued existence waiting for spring. The cause for this abnormal behavior is understood to be positioned in the global climate change, which it seems also affects Monarch butterflies.

In conditions of genre, *Flight Behavior* can be described as tentative imaginary tale, because it deals with a fictional event in a rather realistic way. Another probable genre, to which *Flight Behavior* might belong, is climate creative writing (Wagner-Martin, p.193). One of the

characteristics of tentative fiction is that “it encourages readers to believe in the reality of the fictional worlds it constructs” (Heise, p. 31). Environmental literature comprises a number of different genres, fictional as well as non-fictional. In general, approximate fiction has enlarged increasingly during the last years. It look likes that “the rise of speculative fiction as a central genre of environmentalist thought seems to lay to rest the idea that environmentalist writing and criticism is overly committed to realism” (Heise, p.30). *Flight Behavior* can be considered as a genuine example for this literary genre because “Kingsolver challenges the reader to dwell upon the cross-border politics of climate change, using the case of the Monarch Butterfly and its extraordinary migratory patterns to connect and write about the similarities in rural changes in the US and in Mexico” (Fraser, p. 143). In the author’s prologue in *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver includes a statement about the factual events that are partially referred to in the novel:

In February 2010, an unprecedented rainfall brought down mudslides and catastrophic flooding on the Mexican mountain town of Angangueo. Thirty people were killed, and thousands lost their homes and livelihoods. To outsiders, the town was mainly known as the entry point for visitors to the spectacular colonies of monarch butterflies that overwinter nearby. The town is rebuilding, and the entire migratory population of North American monarchs still returns every autumn to the same mountaintops in central Mexico. The sudden relocation of these overwintering colonies to southern Appalachia is a fictional event that has occurred only in the pages of this novel. (*Flight Behavior*, p. 598)

This quote authenticated that the proceedings which take place in *Flight Behavior* are of an entirely fictional nature, while there are also indications to actions that really did happen.

One of the directly references to real events is through a Mexican family, whose daughter Josefina goes to school with Dellarobia’s son Preston, who had to come to Tennessee because their hometown Angangueo was smashed by a flood. The charges of climate change are represented here as especially personal stage because the family tells their story to Dellarobia through their daughter, who is the only one of them who speaks English. They also are intimately associated to the Monarchs because Angangueo used to earnings from the hibernating insects. Josefina’s metaphors of the proceedings in Angangueo can, with in adding up, are understood as prediction to the fate of the Monarchs in *Flight Behavior* (Wagner-Martin, p. 8, 9).

Climate change itself is an idea that moves towards frequently in the choice of the novel.

Accurate at the creation, for instance, the reader gains knowledge that the harvests on Bear’s farm have been unsuccessful due to heavy rain or that Cub has to make strong effort bring in stone because the roads are regularly washed out. Also, “trees were getting new diseases now. [...] The wetter summers and mild winters of recent years were bringing in new pests that apparently ate the forest out of house and home” (*FB*. p.12). All of these happenings can be draw back openly to climate change and thus provide to highlighting environmental troubles as the story discloses (Wagner-Martin, p. 6).

Many characters in *Flight Behavior* experience an individual growth in the way of the novel. Dellarobia’s husband Cub ultimately rises up against his father and so contributes to preventing him from classifying the trees behind their farm. Hester, Dellarobia’s mother-in-law is affectionate of

Dellarobia and as a result they start to comprehend each other and slowly become closer. Heise monitors that Kingsolver centralize the novel through characters who are inclined to distrust the scientists, environmentalists, and eco-tourists who go down upon their village to research and admire the butterflies. Without patronizing to climate deniers, Kingsolver on the other hand powerfully protects climate knowledge and scientists through her protagonist's alteration from a stay-at-home mother to a growing protection ecologist. (Heise, p.29)

The most understandable improvement is that of Dellarobia, the main protagonist. The readers can know-how Dellarobia's development directly because of the story situation that spotlights on Dellarobia's feelings and thoughts. In the commencement of the novel, for instance, she has an extremely passionate feeling towards the Monarchs, but by reaching more implicated with Ovid and accepting his scientific approach, she progressively accepts more intentional thoughts toward the butterflies (Wagner-Martin, p. 7). Ovid has great influence on Dellarobia's growth because she appears to be very fascinated by him and, in addition, he advocates her attention in the Monarchs on a scientific level. Ovid presents Dellarobia with basic scientific knowledge, about surveillance techniques and a lot of information facts about the Monarchs and climate change in general; Dellarobia looks like to be "untapped potential" for Ovid (Wagner-Martin 14). On a personal level, it happens too obvious that Dellarobia admires Ovid and the open-minded learning he symbolizes. Also, his communications with his wife Dellarobia shows how harmonic and inspirational a loving marriage can be (Wagner-Martin, p. 11). Not only Ovid has influence on Dellarobia, but Dellarobia also inspires Ovid, although her educational background is entirely different from his. For example, he is attracted in her theory about her examination and conclusions of the community members' approach towards science, in exacting in the background of climate change (Wagner-Martin, p. 14). This declaration is intimately related to Kingsolver's personal experiences, as she explains in an interview:

I live in southern Appalachia and I'm surrounded, literally, my home is surrounded by farms and by coal mines. Our agriculture here has gone through one disaster year after another, so climate change is not some kind of abstract future threat here. [...] And it strikes me that these [local small-scale farmers] are the same people who are least prepared to understand and believe in climate change and its causes. (Wagner-Martin, p .19)

Farm life simply speaks to a definite level in the novel. Dellarobia and Cub live on a farm and Cub's parents, Hester and Bear, also live doing farming. They increase sheep, and plant different harvests. In *Flight Behavior*, some of the significant problems that diminutive range farmers have to face nowadays are pointed out in this novel. It appears that "poverty that seems to be unmanageable has arrived: plans must be changed, neighbors must admit to needing help from each other, the patriarchal structure of the Tennessee families has been shaken" (Wagner-Martin, p. 5). As a final remedy, Cub's father means to project the mountain side forest at the back of Dellarobia and Cub's house, even though this would intend to danger landslides if there was any heavy rain. Eventually, the family could persuade him not to cut down the trees. Nevertheless, the difficult economic situation of the Turnbows' is acknowledged frequently in the way of the novel. An endangered living

=====

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:11 November 2018

G. Rajadivya, Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. R. Palanivel

The Angle of Ecocritics: The Study of Environment and the Narrative Situation in  
*Flight Behavior*

being, the Monarch butterfly, arises at the centre of this novel. Still, it seems clear that the connection between humans and this species only partly also mirrors the main apprehension of Kingsolver as spoken in this novel. As a replacement for, it appears that she employs the Monarchs as a sign to observe the relationship of humans and the environment itself. It is a general aspect of environmental literature to argue “individuals’ and communities’ attitudes and beliefs in facing the loss of a sizable part of the natural world, and on the possibilities for keeping these losses as small as possible” (Heise, p. 29, 30). Kingsolver does so by presenting a variety of characters that are different in their morals and happiness. Dellarobia is offered as a person who is overwhelmed by the form of the butterflies and demonstrates a well-built attention in thoughtfulness, the root causes and significances of the animals’ strange behaviour.

Her mother-in-law, in dissimilarity, looks to be not as much involved as in earning money because she starts to charge guests for seeing the butterflies. Dellarobia’s father-in-law exists as being not at all involved in the Monarchs because his main attention throughout most of the novel is to timber the trees and earn money by doing timber business. This demonstrates that Kingsolver attempts to give different approaches towards the unreal circumstances in *Flight Behavior*. Climate change and its costs as such are not enquired but the focal point is set on people’s accepting of it and also their approach towards it.

One more problem raises in *Flight Behavior* is the role of science and scientists in the demolition as well as protection of the environment. Ovid Byron is the character in the novel that he symbolizes the connection between scientists, nature and the community is. Byron is a university professor who studies the Monarch butterflies, which gives him reasons to reside in Dellarobia’s yard. He appears to be somewhat pessimistic concerning the continued existence of the Monarchs, stating rather resentfully that “Not everyone has the stomach to watch an extinction” (FB, p. 440).

Science and ecocriticism are connected but they are far away from each other, as they are troubled with many problems. Heise disputes that on one hand, science is vision as a main cause of environmental weakening, mutually in that it has thrown nature as a thing to be analysis and controlled and in that it gives the earnings of developing nature more fundamentally than was probable by pre-modern resources. On the other hand, environmentalists are conscious that the environmental politics and their personal perceptions into the condition of nature mainly depend upon science. In ecocriticism, this opposing feeling has transformed into different insights of how the sciences should tell civilizing in quest.

It can be said that most of the academic work of ecocritics is significantly predisposed by science, although more ultimately than openly (Heise, p. 169). Observing Barbara Kingsolver’s work, it demonstrates predominantly she is strongly persuaded by science due to her own academic background, which, clearly, has a great impact on her books.

An additional theme that is spoken with some intensity in the novel is the association between religion and nature as well as the association between the individual and the spiritual community. Dellarobia and her family go to church habitually. However, it seems that she does not go to church because of her trust, but because it is considered as a social meeting and as she does not desire to hurt Cub’s family. Dellarobia exists as an extremely thoughtful and significant person who does not wish for to blind trust in something she is not fully persuaded of. On the other hand, when she

=====

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:11 November 2018

G. Rajadivya, Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. R. Palanivel

The Angle of Ecocritics: The Study of Environment and the Narrative Situation in  
*Flight Behavior*

perceives the Monarchs for the first time, she questions her earlier view points and ethics and likely believes the butterflies as a symbol to alteration in her life. This yearning for alteration remains on and happens powerful in the way of the story, while her faith in the role of God through the form of the butterflies enlarges. Instead of junction to God, when the town society acquires attention of the Monarchs and particularly in the truth that Dellarobia exposed them, she rejects to be represented or to be treated in a different way only because she was the first one to discover the animals.

Dellarobia is not a spiritual person and believes slightly uncomforted with all the importance by the church society but she does become aware of the implication she has in this way of proceedings (Wagner-Martin, p. 9). Wagner-Martin argues that the “Turnbow’s participation in their church is a stable, consistent link with the author’s belief that saving the earth and its people, its animals, its living organisms is a spiritual act” (Wagner-Martin, p. 9). In *Flight Behavior*, the church seems to be centre of community, where people assemble, bond and a big division of the town’s social announcement and communication takes place. In conditions of describing, it can be pragmatic that Kingsolver comprises several biblical phrases and references in the novel (Wagner-Martin, p.10, 12).

The town’s pastor, Bobby Ogle, is one of the most significant characters of the town neighbourhood. Dellarobia and her mother-in-law Hester approach him to ask for help when Hester’s husband Bear does not desire to adjust his plans of taking down the woods where the Monarchs hibernate. The church plays an optimistic role in this dispute because Pastor Ogle, who ultimately turns out to be Hester’s undisclosed son, persuades Bear not to cut down the trees. The pastor is presented as a very down-to-earth and self-effacing person and he keenly contributes to discover a solution for the Turnbows’ dispute.

The role of the medium and its association to science is one more problem that is spoken in *Flight Behavior*. The media stand by a journalist who comes to perform Dellarobia’s house two times to conduct interviews, at first with Dellarobia and later with Ovid Byron. The journalist, Tina Ultner, is represented as a fairly-disliked person because while being somewhat pleasant in the opening, she ignored the facts and made bitter Dellarobia’s answers to make the story more attractive for the audience. When Tina comes back to carry out the interview with Ovid, it twists out that he is very sorrowful with the technique the media express the actions:

“Dr. Byron, you’ve studied the monarch butterfly for over twenty years, and you say you have never seen anything like this. It seems everyone has a different idea about what’s going on here, but certainly we can agree that these butterflies are a beautiful sight”. “I don’t agree,” he said. “I am very distressed.” [...] “This is evidence of a disordered system,” he said at last. “Obviously we’re looking at damage. At the normal roosting sites in Mexico, in the spring range, all over the migratory pathways. To say the take away lesson here is beauty, my goodness.” (FB, p. 503)

While the quote is pragmatic, the reporter expressed a somewhat inconsiderate, untrained and ignorant idea of the sense of the alteration in the Monarchs’ flight behavior. She gives the impression she is not attracted by the actual sense of the butterflies, but merely provided an exhilarating story for

the audience. Once again, this relatively pessimistic description of the reporter's effort serves up as fairly straight criticism of the media and their apparently warped perception.

To wind up, it can be said that Kingsolver uses *Flight Behavior* discuss environmental significance that are personally related to climate change and that she attempts to observe the significance from different viewpoints.

---

### References

Fraser, Alistair. "The rural geographies of Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*." *Journal of Rural Studies* 35 (2014). 143-151.

Heise, Ursula K. "Environmental Literature and the Ambiguities of Science." *Anglia* 133(1) (2015). 22-36.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *Flight Behavior*. New York: HarperCollins, 2012

Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Barbara Kingsolver's World. Nature, Art, and the Twenty- First Century*. New York: Bloomsbury 2014.

---

G. Rajadivya, Ph.D. Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Annamalai University  
[divyagnanam91@gmail.com](mailto:divyagnanam91@gmail.com)

Dr. R. Palanivel , Research Supervisor  
Assistant Professor cum Deputy Coordinator, English Wing  
DDE Annamalai University