

# The Butterfly phenomena: A Study of Climate Change on Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*.

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## Abstract

Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* is a clarion call for the forestalled eco-apocalypse, climate change or global warming. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Maggie Gees *The Ice People*, Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* and many other novels in the same vein are futuristic. Even though there is always imagination in fiction, *Flight Behaviour* does not focus on the aftermath of any global disaster. Rather it reflects the actuality of climate change and Monarch butterfly migration. It also focuses on the story of a young woman trying to change her life, and a deeply humane account of working people responding to the local effects of the global climate crisis. Kingsolver has carved a career from examining social issues in her novels, from economic inequality to environmentalism. *Flight Behaviour* portrays the inducement and consequences of climate change that forms the butterfly effect. The paper throws light on the enormous consequence of climate change and the ignorance of reality.

**Keywords - Climate change, Butterfly phenomenon , Futuristic, Global Warming and Environmentalism.**

Climate change is the defining challenge of our age. The science is clear, climate change is happening, the impact is real. The time to act is now.

-Ban Ki-Moon

Climate novel is an emerging literary genre that has caught much attention and popularity in recent years. In many of the archetypal climate novels there is no direct examination of environmental issues; rather environmental disasters serve as a backdrop. But there is a notable shift in more recent climate novels, wherein climate change is examined through scientific facts. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Maggie Gees *The Ice People*, Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* and many other novels in the same vein are futuristic. But Ian McEwan's *Solar*, Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* and Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* reflect

the actuality of climate change through a realistic lens. Though ecocriticism draws its attention to environmental issues in literary texts, climate fiction lacks a serious critical attention. Cheryll Glotfelty mentions it as “If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth’s life support systems were under stress” (xvi).

The Orange prize award winning author (2010) , Barbara Kingsolver has been mindful to the environment all her life . Her books are seeped heavily in themes such as local farming, bio-regionalism, wilderness survival, organic farming, biotic-abiotic interdependence and humanism. She has won the prestigious an Earth day Award from the Kentucky Environmental Quality Commission for writing about timely environmental issues. Climate change is a global phenomenon, by introducing climate change into fiction; Kingsolver portrays the complexities that lie behind it. ‘Alarmism ‘is the commonly used term for climate change. Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* reflects the actuality of this ‘alarmism’ and the migration of monarch butterflies.

The 2012 novel *Flight Behaviour* is set in the fictional background of Feathertown, Tennessee, where the entire monarch butterfly populations have migrated. As a result of a series of events induced by climate change this species’ normal winter habitat in Mexico has flooded. They change their traditional route and migrated to a wrong location. Yet the arrival of butterflies creates an awesome spectacle. Kingsolver describes the arrival of butterflies as:

Unearthly beauty had appeared to her, a version of glory to stop her in the road. For her alone these orange boughs lifted, these long shadows become a brightness rising. It looked like the inside of joy, if a person could see that. A valley of light, an ethereal wind. It had to mean something...She only wondered how long she could watch the spectacle before turning away. It was a lake of fire, something far more fierce and wondrous than either of those elements alone. The impossible. (21-22)

The monarch butterflies enrapture the local citizens, who find religious significance in the event. The previously unknown town becomes renowned among tourist, journalists and scientists who travel to witness the elegance. But “nobody was asking why the butterflies were there, the big news was just that they were”(32). Dellarobia Turnbow, the protagonist is a farmer’s wife in the southern Appalachians .She is trapped in an inescapable rural poverty and the drudgery of life as a mother of two small children. Her life, until the arrival of butterflies is predictable, narrow and dull. But her life is upended, understanding of her own self and the world both are altered with the arrival of butterflies.

People in the Feathertown have different perceptions over the arrival of butterflies. Dellarobia on her way to uphill in search of an illicit love, finds the butterflies seemingly warns her to stop her pursuit. To Dellarobia's father – in – law butterflies are the means to attract tourist, through which the family debt can be paid. The local residents associated the arrival of butterflies with the rebirth of the Lord. To Ovid Byron, the entomologist, the butterflies appear to be the alarming sign of global threat i.e. - climate change. The conversation between Dellarobia and Ovid reveals the serious issue of whole climate change:

‘Where we will go from here,’ he repeated – Finally Ovid said, ‘Into a new earth. Different from the one that has always supported them. In the manner to which we have all grown accustomed. This is not a good thing, Dellarobia,’ he added. ‘A whole new earth.’

‘I know’ she said. A world where you could count on nothing you’d ever known or trusted, that was no place you wanted to be. In so far as any person could understand that, she believed she did. (325)

Through the character Ovid, Kingsolver shows her transcending concern on the issues of global warming. Kingsolver's choice of name ‘Ovid’ refers to the Roman poet and his narrative poem *Metamorphoses*. In *Flight Behavior* the metamorphoses can associate with two different levels. One is the monarch butterflies migration from their natural habitat and the other is, Dellarobia's transition to a new self. Dellarobia observes that her emerging new self is often pains about the changing weather patterns. On a Christmas shopping trip to buy presents for her children at the local dollar store, most of which Dellarobia finds is too expensive. But when she helps the scientists to construct a field laboratory, she happily tears the price tags. She attempts to save the butterflies by shipping them to a warmer place. Ovid describes her act as “this is a concern of conscience, not of biology. Science does not tell us what we should do. It only tells us what is” (327).

Dellarobia's new ability to recognize her environment and place enchantment leads to ecological consciousness. She explains the butterfly effect to her husband Cub.

‘They all come here for winter, and they shouldn't have, because the winter is too cold here. But they came because of the things being too warm. Or I guess we don't know because of what. But he says it's something gone way wrong’.

‘Now see, I don't hold with that’, Cub said. Exactly as she had expected. Cub would not be disposed to this way of thinking, any more than the people in the town or Tina Ultner and her national broadcast audience. (259)

The entire preconceived notion about the arrival of butterflies is collapsed with reality. The age old notions need a renewed attention. Dellarobia observes the fact that, Nation based boundaries are not matters with climate change. She views the entire earth as a single planet i.e. - the integrated whole. She meets the Mexican family whose house is destroyed by a mudslide; it is also the usual migration destiny of the

butterfly. Kingsolver highlights that sense of geographical distinction and borders is non-sensible in correlation to the environmental disaster.

The people of Feathertown cling to religious values. Their most readily accepted answer for climate change is a religious one. Weather is “the Lord’s business” (261). This response has a positive connotation if the demise of the Monarch butterfly is interpreted as the loss of a part of God’s creation. But the local people’s ‘blindness’ have never been viewed the butterflies as the part of God’s creation. They view the Monarchs as their financial profit as it attracts a lot of tourists. Kingsolver highlights the fact that in the modern world religious ethics are not a solution for the environmental crisis as man alters it for their self benefit.

As a social activist, Kingsolver blames the media. The local residents of Feathertown are ignorant to understand the “weird weather” (84) and ‘unrelenting rain’ (49). Rather than collecting information genuinely, media persons favor with their audience for sensation.

The post doctoral researcher Pete comments that “is that we are not sure about climate change. It’s too confusing. So every environmental impact story has to be made into something else. Sex it up if possible, that’s what your news people drove out here for. It’s what sells.” (230). Cub, husband of Dellarobia listens to the radio show of Johnny Midgeon who makes fun on global warming. Whenever there is a change of bad weather, he uses the line “All Gore can come toast his buns on this” (260). Dellarobia recognizes that how media manipulates serious issues. To the media persons, global warming and environmental issues are no longer connected with popular public appeal. The local residents are unaware of the scientific facts of climate change whereas the urban intellectuals are seldom worried about the weird weather. Their blindness toward the environmental change is described as “looking without seeing” (52).

Mary Ellen Snodgrass in her book *Barbara Kingsolver: A Literary Companion* expresses that “Altruism is the force in Kingsolver’s novels that elevates them from entertainment to didactic humanism”.(39). It is visible in *Flight Behaviour*, she amuses her readers and simultaneously elucidates the serious issues. *Flight Behaviour* has given an illuminating picture of scientific facts and it is rich with the ecological details of climate change. Brigitte Nerlich suggests that the climate novel provides space for science to enter into an imaginative and exploratory world. She views:

It might be that cli-fi brings modeling from the laboratory bench (imagine reading a cli-fi novel in bed). However, unlike scientific climate modelers, writers and readers of cli-fi novels are ‘allowed’, indeed it is their task, to extrapolate from modeling certain scientific futures to imaging, exploring and testing out political futures. This means that cli-fi novels provide a space for engaging in and with climate science as well as climate politics, albeit in a fictional way.( 14)

Through the combination ecological enchantment and scientific knowledge, Kingsolver is able to make her reader aware of the ecocide and climate change. The interplay of natural world (butterfly) and the

humans' conflicted heart develops a kind of eco awareness in the novel. There are many social effects of climate change such as famine, flood, earthquakes, and extreme temperature. Millions of people are displaced from their homes due to the afore mentioned reason –climate change. Kingsolver makes it obvious that Dellarobia is also a kind of ecologist who concerned with the unusual circumstances of Tennessee. The novel concludes that the monarch butterflies open the heart of Dellarobia as well as the readers to take a step to protect something big and fragile - the earth. The gorgeous enchanted view of the migrated Monarchs is no more spectacular, it is an enormous consequence of global warming.

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