

Exploring Female Empowerment and Environmental Activism in Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*

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Abstract—*Flight Behavior* is a multilayered novel by Barbara Kingsolver, weaving strands of climate change, environmental activism, and personalized transformation, especially the path to female empowerment and agency, within the backdrop of rural Appalachia. It centers on Dellarobia Turnbow, a woman circumscribed in domestic roles and household work by the traditional social system, who embarks on her path of self-discovery. Kingsolver examines the intersection of gender, environment, and individual agency through the symbolic presence of the displaced monarch butterflies and the growing environmental consciousness of Dellarobia. One way that *Flight Behavior* exemplifies women's empowerment is through Dellarobia's beginning to break free from social restraints by reinventing herself and finding her voice in her community and the new nature world that the monarch butterflies have presented her to. Drawing, for instance, on both ecofeminist theory and the symbolic interpretation of the butterfly motif, the novel reveals deep insights that speak about the association of women with the natural environment, how personal transformation is a metaphor, and at the same time, an imperative response to wider ecological and social crises.

Index Terms—Female empowerment, agency, ecofeminism, patriarchal structures, monarch butterflies, Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*

I. INTRODUCTION

In Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, female empowerment and environmental crisis merge into climate fiction, commonly referred to as cli-fi. This sub-genre—which offers a forum for depicting the impact of climate change on society, opens up an arena where personal transformation and global environmental challenges co-exist. In this light, *Flight Behavior* reflects both a personal journey that the protagonist, Dellarobia Turnbow, has embarked upon and the wider ecological disaster informing her

world. Through cli-fi lenses, Kingsolver has been able to show not only the far-reaching effects of climate change but also how environmental awareness acts as a catalyst toward female empowerment, especially in the most marginalized and rural communities.

Cli-fi, Carolyn Kormann suggests, copes with "far-reaching, fundamental transformation", by fusing the environmental crisis of our time with deeply private human experience. This genre is linked to the literary convention that emerged in the Romantic Period, late 18th to mid-19th century, through the works of writers and poets such as William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, John Keats, P.B. Shelley and Lord Byron, when much prominence was given to the beauty, power and spiritual significance of nature. To these writers, nature was not merely a background against which human activity took place, but it was an alive and dynamic constituent capable of evoking powerful feelings, spiritual awareness, and personal and philosophical introspection. They saw in the close relation between the soul and the natural world how this confrontation with nature comes to shape individual consciousness, emotion, and thought. Cli-fi also dons an activist mantle, drawing from the works of the Romantic period, to usher readers into the global climate emergency. In *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver uses the ecological disruption this displaced monarch butterflies create to parallel Dellarobia's inner disruption—a woman confined by social, economic, and gendered limitations who starts to assert her own agency. As Dellarobia grows in her consciousness about the environmental disruption that surrounds her, she also grows in her consciousness about her personal power and choices that she can make as a means of adjusting her circumstances.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a wealth of scholarship that has explored the novel's environmental themes, much of which focuses on the novel's varied depictions of climate change and ecological disruption. For instance, Kristin Jacobson argues that Kingsolver's use of rural settings and environmental crises in her fiction serves as a critique of modern society's disconnect from nature. Other scholars, such as Greg Garrard provides a theoretical explanation with which to interpret environmental literature, setting a work such as *Flight Behavior* within a broader ecocritical discourse. It is within this framework that one may trace how Kingsolver has exploited ecological symbols-the case of the monarch butterflies-portraying the fragility yet sturdiness of the environment. By turn, Kingsolver's presentation of those symbols wholly chimes with ecocritical interpretations that highlight human agency upon nature and raise the alarm regarding the seriousness of the situation concerning environmental responsibility in a warming world (Garrard).

In "*Narrative Structure and Environmental Dystopia in Kingsolver's Flight Behavior*," Susan Baker provides an overview of the different narrative approaches Kingsolver has adopted regarding description of themes related to ecological awareness. According to Baker, this structure of the novel-constantly swinging between Dellarobia's personal evolution and environmental themes-builds up a critical dystopia in which hope and despair play off each other. It is such a structure that lets Kingsolver present Dellarobia's journey to empowerment in correspondence with the overall ecological awakening and thus frames her personal growth within the greater urgent collective environmental conscience.

Less attention has, however, been given to its visualization of female empowerment and agency. Ecofeminist scholars, like Carolyn Merchant, have for a long time argued that the oppression of women in society is interrelated with the exploitation of nature, a theme which *Flight Behavior* explicitly explores through the character of Dellarobia. In "*Dellarobia's Journey: Class and Environmental Awareness in Flight Behavior*," Andrew J. Hoffman analyzes how socioeconomic struggles shape the cognition of the characters concerning ecological

concerns. According to Hoffman, "the monetary difficulties of Dellarobia become influential on her cognition of the ecological disasters." Kingsolver also places her protagonist's gradual development regarding environmental awareness against oppressive socio-economic conditions in rural Appalachian life. In fact, Hoffman's observations are illustrative because Kingsolver identifies environmental activism with class struggles when he suggests that ecological and feminist concerns find their clear identification and pressure in the complex socio- economic topography.

Jane Bennett articulates this problem of agency for non-human entities with greater radicality in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* to an understanding in which the butterflies in *Flight Behavior* are active agents. Although Bennett does not write of Kingsolver specifically, her theories on material agency do provide a useful lens from which to consider how Kingsolver gives meaning to non-human nature, and through which the butterflies might embody resilience and resistance parallel to Dellarobia's journey toward self-empowerment.

Feminist literary critics have also explored the ways that Kingsolver deploys her female protagonists to challenge conventional male and female roles. Works such as *The Poisonwood Bible* by Kingsolver present women who negotiate around patriarchal systems in their quest for agency. In *Flight Behavior*, this theme is right at the forefront, as Dellarobia's empowerment is both personal and indicative of the constraints set by society at large. It is a premise that scholars such as Rebecca Tillett have talked about in how Kingsolver's female characters experience epiphanies that themselves extend to challenging the status quo; this pattern does emerge in the story of Dellarobia.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this research, the qualitative research methodology has been used, and the method of investigation is textual analysis. Analysis of significant scenes, dialogues, and symbols in the novel will explain how Kingsolver constructs female empowerment. The guiding theoretical framework for this study is underpinned by an ecofeminist approach, in which connections between gender and environmental issues can be explored. Drawing on an ecofeminist theoretical approach, the paper will discuss to what

extent Dellarobia's personal journey reflects more general environmental concerns and in what respect her environment is interwoven with her growing awareness of those issues. Equally important to this work, symbolic analysis plays a prime role, especially in relation to the monarch butterflies forming some sort of motif throughout the novel. The butterflies are seen to represent transformation and freedom, thus being caught up in a struggle concerning climate change, showing a reflection of Dellarobia's struggle for self-autonomy.

IV. DISCUSSION

In *Flight Behavior*, Barbara Kingsolver constructs Dellarobia's struggle for empowerment rather well within the context of rural, patriarchal systems that commit women to traditional positions. Kingsolver draws attention to the fact that the struggle is not merely personal but is rather emblematic of the greater experience of women living in the South under very limiting societal frameworks. The fact that the novel is set in a rural Appalachian community is important, because it brings into play a lot of deeply traditional cultural expectations Dellarobia would have to deal with. Her community reflects typical gender roles: women have to be sacrificing wives and mothers; little room for personal ambition or independence, *"She'd given up on all the sparks, which she'd thought of as little fireworks she might hold in her hand like a sparkler. They were things she could not even remember, now."* (p. 34). This is reflected in Dellarobia's early dissatisfaction with her life and marriage as desires for a different path were quashed by early motherhood and economic necessity.

Kingsolver overlays this with an argument against even more general capitalistic-patriarchal structures that keep women marginalized. Dellarobia's personal shortcomings are intertwined with her family's economic challenges, further entrenching a gendered division of labor and lack of opportunities for women in her community. The Turnbows, like so many families in their region, live hand-to-mouth on farming and logging that Cub's family has done for generations. *"She and Cub worked harder than many, but their reward was merely to avoid getting poorer"* (p. 59) But this very economic scenario only heightens Dellarobia's sense of entrapment, while

reinstating a patriarchal system which rewards male labor as female effort continues to go unobserved.

Kingsolver's critique extends further than domestic or rural patriarchy to touch on the ways in which even capitalism exacerbates environmental degradation and, further, women's subjugation. The novel depicts how economic interests, more so those related to extractive industries like logging, largely contribute to environmental destruction and the disempowerment of rural women. The financial dependence of the Turnbow family upon Cub's father, Bear, for control over their land and decisions about it reflects broader mechanisms of capitalism operating to marginalize both nature and women's voices. Dellarobia's growing awareness of these intertwined forces elicits her rebellion-not just against the domestic sphere that confines her, but also against the great capitalist system that exploits people and nature.

Her journey towards agency is increasingly marked by engagement with the scientific enquiry into the butterflies. Dr Bryon and his team bring into Dellarobia's world not only a language of science and environmental activism, but also another framework of understanding in respect to the natural world and her own life. She pits the scientific community, entrenched in fact and rationality, against the more religious, conservative ethos of Dellarobia's community, which considers the butterflies a miracle. Such clash between scientific and religious interpretations reflects Dellarobia's internal conflict-the life she had been programmed to settle for versus the possibilities beyond it.

As Dellarobia begins to see herself through the eyes of the scientists-primarily Dr. Byron-she starts understanding her potentials in a new way. She realizes she is capable of substantially contributing to something bigger than herself and starts working beyond the preordained role of wife and mother. Dr. Byron's acknowledgment of Dellarobia's smartness and good observation skills, *"You have an eye for this"* (p. 176) provides a kind of validation that allows her to begin a process of reclaiming agency over herself. It is in this relationship that Kingsolver evokes the theme that empowerment requires affirmation from without, especially in a system that does little but consistently devalue women's effort. In Dellarobia, her empowerment is less about denial of her family and her roots but trying to find ways of

asserting agency within those constraints and, finally, beyond.

In the novel *Flight Behavior*, Dellarobia's power and coming of age are greatly rooted in motherhood. Throughout the early parts of the novel, her identity as a mother defines her and very often confines her. As she becomes increasingly aware of the ecological disaster occurring in her surroundings, her feelings of responsibility as a mother extend into concern about future generations. Then, motherhood becomes empowerment, especially through her children, like her son Preston, who do indeed force a change upon her and an urge to fight for a better future for herself and them. Being a mother increased the call for her to confront environmental crises on very personal terms, as she starts to look at the kind of world her children are going to face. The environmental devastation brought about by climate change ceases to be an abstract issue; it is a real and present threat to her children's lives: "*It was no longer just Dellarobia's story, not only her life caught in the crosshairs. Everything she'd given birth to would feel the fire*" (p. 289). This shift from personal, narrow view of mothering to wider, expanded vision is at the heart of Dellarobia's empowerment. Kingsolver signals that maternal instincts have the potential to foster social and ecological transformation as a woman like Dellarobia develops into an advocate first for her children and then for the planet. The sense of agency starts to widen as she grows more involved in the struggle to save the natural habitat around her. She finally starts to redefine herself beyond her rural existence and finds her voice, which can be heard in family and community affairs alike. In this novel, motherhood works both as an obstacle and a trigger for Dellarobia's change and growth toward independence.

Kingsolver also creates a foil for Dellarobia's increasing empowerment through the responses of the other female characters in the novel. She considers intergenerational dynamics and female solidarity through the relationships Dellarobia forms with the other women in her life, especially those that cut across age, class, and cultural boundaries. Such relationships, often fraught with tension, expose the ways women negotiate societal expectations, family obligations, and personal longings. Dellarobia's relationship with her mother-in-law, Hester, is exemplary of the tension that arises inherently

through intergenerational dynamics. Hester stands as a figure of power and repression-the evocative conventional patriarchal values of rural life. She stands for the older generation of women who have been fully enculturated in the patriarchal values of their community. It is her stoicism and putting up with hardship without complaint that undergirds her existence-modes by which women like Dellarobia are expected to suppress their own needs for the benefit of others. In this way, tension builds between Hester and Dellarobia to an apex and then an approximation of reconciliation as Dellarobia begins to flex a little agency. Kingsolver uses this dynamic to explore how female empowerment is not only about a girl breaking free from male control but also challenging expectations set within women themselves.

Her friendship with Dovey, on the other hand, evinces a more contemporary, nursing version of female camaraderie and thus provides Dellarobia with a judgement-free zone. Dovey encourages and provokes Dellarobia's hopes and annoyances, even allowing her to mirror herself in a friend's hopes and frustrations. It is essential bonding for Dellarobia, who needs to vent, seek guidance, and momentarily be free of marriage and outside demands of rural life. As staunchly supported by Dove, emotional connections through peer support are made by women to navigate personal and social pressures. Again, Dellarobia's interactions with Juliette, Ovid Byron's wife, show great subtlety in regard to gender dynamics and women's agency. Juliette is another version of female solidarity, a woman who has cut out her own space within a male-dominated world, offering glimpses into a life that has been truly molded by education, autonomy, and professional success. Her stable, settled life contrasted sharply with Dellarobia's turmoil. It was a contrast that deepened Dellarobia's feelings of inadequacy, yet it also forced her to reflect upon her own conditions and possible fluidities. Juliette's confidence and poise, in contrast with the insecurity of Dellarobia, epitomize other ways in which empowerment can come-for some individuals, dependent upon social station and availability of privilege. Still, both women are curious and intelligent. Juliette's life and scientific background are poles apart from Dellarobia's; she is the model of what Dellarobia can achieve in her journey of self-discovery. She appears briefly in the book; thus, her role is just that of

contributing to the theme of diverse forms of agency and women's empowerment.

Throughout *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver uses symbolism, but perhaps one of the most powerful and touching symbols throughout the novel is that of the butterfly narrative. The monarch butterflies that unexpectedly descend on Dellarobia's Appalachian home serve as literal and metaphorical representations of these themes of transformation, ecological imbalance, and personal empowerment. In no small measure, the story of the butterflies fully engages with the novel's considerations of climate change, women's agency, and the relation between science and religion but also can be said to reflect Dellarobia's personal journey toward self-discovery and empowerment: "*The strange beauty of their plight made her see her own life differently. Her life had the possibility of motion.*" (p. 306). Climate change has also dislocated the monarch butterflies of the novel from their usual migration path - a picture indicating the dislocation and displacement of the characters, most especially Dellarobia.

Just as the butterflies are misplaced, finding shelter in a landscape foreign to them, Dellarobia finds herself trapped, too, in a life hostile to her wants and dreams. The butterflies serve as allegories for Dellarobia's feelings of entrapment and freedom, along with a larger ecological force caused by human action.

All the same, Kingsolver's use of the monarch butterfly is relevant as well. Monarchs are well-known for their extraordinary migration-thousands of miles to specific overwintering sites. In the novel, however, their migration is disrupted and lands in an unsuitable place, a phenomenon which builds on the broader theme of ecological imbalance. This disrupted life cycle of the butterflies symbolizes the larger disruption of nature caused by climate change, and their plight sends a warning of how fragile the ecosystems are that sustain life on Earth. The environmental concern of the novel presents this displacement as a call to urgent action with regard to climate change before more species-human beings included-find themselves in those precarious positions.

In *Flight Behavior*, the monarch butterflies parallel Dellarobia's path of self-discovery and empowerment. At the outset of the novel, she was confined to the roles of wife and mother within a patriarchal rural community. While she has this

unarticulated desire for something more, she feels incapable of changing her circumstances. The coming of the butterflies is a real turning point in Dellarobia's awakening. Like the monarchs, famous for their radical metamorphosis, Dellarobia undergoes her own metamorphosis. Through the butterflies, she starts to envision a life that expands beyond the rural setting and beyond the narrow roles prescribed for women. These butterflies become strong agents of change, which force her to re-evaluate her identity and the future that awaits her to open up vistas of personal and intellectual development. The story of the monarchs serves also as a metaphor for the empowerment and agency of women. Although fragile and delicate in appearance, the butterflies make one of the most arduous migrations in the natural world. Their resilience reflects Dellarobia's inner strength and potential that she gradually comes to recognize. Like the butterflies, Dellarobia rises beyond expectations to show she is determined and able, rising above the shackles of societal constraints to take control of her life.

Moreover, the butterflies become a harbinger of hope and a promise of change. The book has been bombarding Dellarobia with different signs of global warming and the catastrophe that accompanies it. The coming of the butterflies, though initially perceived as a form of a miraculous sign by the community where she lives, in reality epitomizes the capacity to adapt and survive. Kingsolver uses the butterflies to hint that while the outcome of global warming is catastrophic, it is still redeemable by humanity if only the people were open to making the necessary changes. Dellarobia's unfolding knowledge of the crisis in her surroundings mirrors her own growing awareness as she realizes that she too has some control over the course taken by her life.

Religious symbolism also plays a very important role in the narrative of the butterflies. At the very beginning of the novel, the coming of the butterflies was viewed by the local community as some kind of a miracle-a sign from God himself. Even Dellarobia thinks of the butterflies, at first, as an example of a godly interference into her grey and unsatisfactory life. This religious interpretation is a reflection of beliefs inbred in the community, whereby any form of nature and its changes are often looked at through the glass of God's will. But as the novel progresses, Dellarobia transitions from a strict religious view of

the world to a scientific and rationally explained one. Considered a miracle, the butterflies are now subjected to the performance of scientific analysis and representative of one much larger thematic concern: the tension between science and religion. Meanwhile, Dellarobia's increasing involvement in the scientific study of the butterflies symbolizes her journey toward intellectual and personal empowerment as she begins to question the entrenched dogmas that have shaped her life.

Kingsolver also uses the story of the butterfly to examine the theme of interrelatedness. The complicated systems of migrations by the monarch butterflies are dependent on sensitive levels of environmental conditions to continue their existence; their plight in the novel is supposed to serve as a reminder of the interrelatedness of all life on Earth and the ways in which human actions disrupt the natural world. This interrelatedness extends even to the way in which this novel considers gender roles and women's empowerment; Kingsolver seems to insinuate that oppression of women and exploitation of the environment derive from one and the same patriarchal root. Dellarobia's personal change is yoked to her developing sensitivity with a macro-ecological disaster, as she comes to perceive that her own emancipation is inextricably related to the state of nature.

In the climax of the novel, the future of the butterflies is uncertain as their survival would greatly depend upon whether the environmental conditions of this new habitat could actually support them. The openness here is consistent with the general open-ended message of the novel regarding climate change and female empowerment: the future is not certain, but it has not yet been decided. Dellarobia, like the butterflies, might thrive if allowed to adapt and take the reins of her life. Yet Kingsolver indicates that this will entail both personal and collective actions: while the future of the butterflies requires human agency over climate change, so does Dellarobia's rise require her taking action against the structures that have held her back.

The butterfly plot in *Flight Behavior* is symbolic of transformation, resilience, and the interrelation of life. Kingsolver uses the monarch butterflies to reflect on environmental degradation, female empowerment, and tension between science and religion, at the same time pointing toward the

possibility of change and renewal. The butterflies play the dual roles of the fragility and strength of nature, and their voyage somewhat mirrors Dellarobia's road to self-awareness and agency. In this case, Kingsolver used such symbolism to reflect a call to urgency for ecological and social disequilibriums in action and to suggest that empowerment of women and protection of the environment are mutually codified.

V. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

In *Flight Behavior*, Barbara Kingsolver interweaves mature female empowerment with ecological awareness and personal transformation through the symbolic narrative of the monarch butterflies. Dellarobia's self-realization, agency, and, finally, empowerment is much related to the environmental crisis unfolding around her. These butterflies become a strong symbol, displaced by climate change into this alien environment, relating to Dellarobia's sense of displacement in her own life and her gradual metamorphosis as she starts to reclaim her agency. The butterflies are not just the backdrop of this story, rather they help Kingsolver delve into the junctures between personal and environmental disasters. Her empowerment will grow with her involvement in the scientific study of the butterfly and the ecological problems concerned. Growing awareness of the environmental degradation wrought by climate change is therefore accompanied by questioning about the social and gendered structures confining her. Simultaneously, her growing consciousness about the world at large reveals her inner movement from a life of passivity-accepting all limitations-to an active engagement with those same limitations, both personal and ecological.

The butterfly narrative works also to telescope Kingsolver's indictment of the capitalistic-patriarchal structure that exploits not only women but also the environment. The monarchs, in their fragile yet resilient nature, symbolize real possibilities of both ecological and personal survival against the odds. Dellarobia's passage from disappointment and limitation into a life of empowerment and self-determination reflects the possibility of transformation in the case of individuals and also the world in general, provided one is prepared to rise to

the challenge posed by patriarchal norms and environmental degradation.

Kingsolver's novel so aptly highlights the tight interlink between women's empowerment and environmental justice. Dellarobia grows not only within her awakened self but also realizes her being a part of a greater network of ecological and social forces. One notices that her empowerment does not happen solo or in isolation but through active participation in the environmental crisis surrounding her, as can be very well contextualized with the ecofeminism of Kingsolver. In the same way that butterflies depend upon a certain delicate balance in nature to survive, so too does the empowerment of Dellarobia depend on her navigating and finally challenging the social, economic, and environmental systems that have constrained her thus far. *Flight Behavior* is a highly effective and insightful analysis of female independence and freedom. Through the life of Dellarobia Turnbow, Kingsolver explores the ways in which social roles and domestic duties constrain women and how awareness of the natural world and themselves can potentially reclaim their agency. The employment of the butterfly image throughout the novel substitutes for a symbolic change for Dellarobia, both individual and universal, similar to the overall ecofeminist themes of the novel. In fact, that the novel avoids description of what ultimately occurs serves to further this metaphor of struggle for women such as Dellarobia and mankind overall when faced with ecological crisis. In the end, Kingsolver calls for a reimagining of our relationships with the world and the institutions that govern our lives, and a collective, conscious, and inherent empowerment that recognizes our interdependence with nature. Placing Dellarobia's empowerment in the context of the environmental catastrophe, Kingsolver offers a compelling vision of ecological and human recovery while underscoring the interconnectedness of gender, power, and nature.

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