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A Study of Woman and Nature in Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*

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ABSTRACT

Nature is always identified with the feminine form and worshipped in the form of rivers, natural vegetation and rain. Women, nowadays, apart from being a caretaker of the family and children, are also involved as environmental activists. Barbara Kingsolver's novels address the modern environmental issues and the quest for identity. Her novels are intertwined with feministic concerns and environmental issues. Her universal themes, concern for ecological changes and feministic perspectives have gained her a special place in the recent women's writing. Her female characters are predominantly strong and self-determining women. This novel *Flight Behaviour* (2012), taken for the study, examines the interaction of woman with nature through the characters. The protagonist Dellarobia, discontented with her marital life and poverty in the Appalachians impetuously attempt to seek out an affair. Instead of pursuing her personal desires, she discovers a terrible marvel of nature, millions of monarch butterflies. Suddenly the world changes around her and she eventually identifies and pursues her passion independently. We see the female protagonist portrayed as a lover of nature in this novel. As generally woman is kind, peaceful and helpful, they mingle with nature easily and are apt to sustain in the natural world. Barbara engages the readers with the details of Dellarobia along with the environmental issues that are the need of the hour. The paper studies how women interact with nature and explores the truths we live by and the complexities lie behind them.

Keywords: monarch butterflies, environment, natural world, woman, nature, ecology

INTRODUCTION

Literature has rich biological inheritance since it has created many literary works on naturalism, romanticism and transcendentalism. Nature is portrayed as feminine as they are controlled, exploited, oppressed and dominated. Like most of the classic literary works Barbara's *Flight Behaviour* is both a touching and an eye-opening work. Her commitment to literature is seen through the way she incorporates social message in it. Beautifully discussing the butterflies and about a young mother Barbara shares with us an integration of significant issues like global warming with a narrative as a way of informing the reality to the readers. This paper examines the interaction of woman with nature through the characters of Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* and the significance in overcoming the challenges and being beneficial to the natural world to lead an interconnected life with nature. The novel displays the close knit relationship between woman and nature and the adverse circumstances they face in their life.

Nature and environment play an integral part in Barbara Kingsolver's life and she discusses ecological problems in her work. Barbara's stay in the Republic of Congo in 1963 has motivated her curiosity in reading and writing. Kingsolver graduated in biology and worked as a scientist before becoming a freelance writer. She lives in a farmhouse completely environment conscious. Due to this predominant background and lifestyle, Barbara Kingsolver engages herself as a prominent writer in promoting literature as well as contributing to the environment. The novel *Flight Behaviour* examines the issues pertinent to modern human beings like ecological destruction, familial issues, self etc., Her novels are intertwined with feministic concerns and environmental issues. Ecofeminism focuses on the interconnectedness between exploitation of nature as well as oppression of women. The main

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story in *Flight Behaviour* (2012) is about the monarch butterflies that hibernate in Tennessee which they find as an alternative place in Mexico. The novel discusses the consequences of global warming with eco-feministic perspective.

Dellarobia Turnbow, the protagonist of *Flight Behaviour* frayed between being a wife and mother later identifies her scientific curiosity and dream to achieve it. Despite the social norms she adopts her own interests finally. This expresses Barbara's stand for women empowerment as she questions the social norms framed for women. The novel tussles with change and development and results as a thought-provoking novel dealing with important issues. Dellarobia Turnbow is a poor farm wife who leads a monotonous life with dissatisfied motherhood and domineering in laws. She is a 28-year-old young woman and a mother of two children. She lives with her husband in a farm near the town Cleary in rural Tennessee. She faces a tough life in the sheep farm looking after it and her children. She gives up her interests and passions in order to upbringing her children when she becomes a mother at the age of only seventeen. At this early age, her first child dies and then they have their two children, Preston and Cordie. She, then, becomes a loving and caring mother. This quality of her is exhibited in her fondness for the monarch butterflies later.

The boredom in her life makes her to commit adultery with a telephone repairman. On her way she finds the awe-inspiring and sizzling presence of millions of monarch butterflies in the trees and twirling through the air: "A small shift between cloud and sun altered the daylight, and the whole landscape intensified, brightening before her eyes. The forest blazed with its own internal flame" (19). Her encounter with the monarch butterflies puzzles her and eventually changes her mind from meeting the telephone repairman. She does not continue the affair and the butterflies change her life significantly. Her transformation thus happens when she encounters the millions of monarch butterflies with their glowing presence everywhere.

The density of the butterflies in the air now gave her a sense of being underwater, plunged into a deep pond among bright fishes. They filled the sky. Out across the valley, the air itself glowed golden. Every tree on the far mountainside was covered with trembling flame, and that, of course, was butterflies. She had carried the vision inside herself for so many days in ignorance, like an unacknowledged pregnancy. The fire was alive, and incomprehensibly immense, as unbounded, uncountable congregation of flame-coloured insects.(72)

Their usual migratory direction has been interrupted and their striking view is the sign of an environmental disaster. "She let it crawl onto her hand and held it close to her eyes. The orange wings were scrolled with neat black lines, like liquid eyeliner, expertly applied. In almost thirty years of walking around on the grass of the world, she couldn't recall having spent two minutes alone with a butterfly"(73). The readers perceive the amazing event through Dellarobia's eyes. She astonishingly looks at them astonished as she is completely unaware of their dangerous scientific facts initially.

When the townspeople come to know of the butterflies, she gains sudden attention of everyone. The media, and a scientist and his team show interest in the weird behaviour of the butterflies. The research team along with the scientist start their work with the help of Dellarobia who becomes a part time worker and helps the team. The butterflies represent Dellarobia's survival becoming the centre of the novel *Flight Behaviour*. They belong to Mexico and were never seen in these many numbers in Appalachia Mountains. The doctor with the help of his assistants set up a lab in Dellarobia's old sheep barn. She is slowly involved in this science and gets absorbed in her work. The entire novel is shifted from her emptiness in her life to that of climate change. Dr. Byron explains her that if it gets too cold or too warm the entire butterfly species would become extinct. The monarch butterflies are in extreme danger as they are not used to the winter prevalent in Tennessee which might freeze and even kill them. She tries to explain the peril to her husband, her mother in law and her best friend Dovey.

The novel is told from Dellarobia Turnbow's perspective in which the readers are taken to the rural South Eastern United States where the monarch butterflies turns off their migratory course. The powerful effect of Dellarobia's transformation and growth are as remarkable as the butterflies. *Flight Behaviour* is about the love of science and has lot of social justice in it. When it comes to women empowerment Dellarobia continues to be a wife and mother but determines to take up a job and love science. From a mundane life leading person, she transforms into a more

environmentally friendly person. With the real facts on climate change, weather, butterflies and struggle of a poor American family Barbara creates a compelling and a scientific story.

Susan Griffin, the ecofeminist writer, in *Women and Nature* (1978) claims, “Women speak with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature” (1).

Barbara through her novel brings out the interaction between woman and nature offering a solution to the future to lead a fruitful, happy and interconnected life. Kingslover’s women characters are ordinary but resilient women who endure despite the trials and tribulations they face. They are strong and committed to their families, survive with meagre income but fulfil their duties to the family members. They flourish when they meet the natural world. They prove that women not only belong to the domestic space of the house but search their identity in much wider settings like farms and forests. They consider nature as their home, comprehend the interconnectedness present in nature and celebrate ecology. They are replete with land ethics, treat both humans and nonhumans equally and are successful in managing their home and land as well.

The protagonist emphasizes the neglect of the environment as well as addresses the dangers. Barbara’s woman characters confess and welcome the inherent values in the natural world. Women’s choices and bodies are often controlled by patriarchal standpoints but in this novel the protagonist Dellarobia resists to make an ecological balance in nature and finally emerge as a robust independent woman. The effects of global warming on the monarch butterflies and on people’s lives change Dellarobia’s life positively.

The unexpected rain and severe cold could be the termination of this subtle species and they needed a much warmer place. Dellarobia relates the environmental disaster of flood and landslide in Mexico to the habitat of the monarch butterflies. Since their habitat has been ruined, they have flown to their farmland. “And that’s exactly what happened in Mexico, where the butterflies were before. They clear-cut the mountain, and a flood brought the whole thing down on top of them. You should see the pictures on the internet” (235).

The long-standing migration tradition of the monarch butterflies has been disturbed due to the ecological disaster. The effect of urbanisation and anthropological activities can be well traced in *Flight Behaviour*. Dr. Byron is an entomologist at DeVary University in New Mexico. He visits the valley to study the sudden arrival of the monarch butterflies in the Appalachian Mountains. He studies that the extinction of butterflies is threatened in the mountains because of unstoppable rain and high temperatures. He needs Dellarobia’s help in assisting him for which she accepts confidently. Byron explains her habitat and migration of monarch butterflies, coral reefs and vanishing rare insects. His gloom is seen in the lines “He has asked her what was the use of saving a world that had no soul left in it. Continents without butterflies, seas without coral reefs, he meant” (438).

The anthropocentric attitude of human beings is well perceived from the above lines. When a species is completely wiped off from the earth it can change the entire ecosystem and humans have no rights to reduce or deplete the ecological richness. Dellarobia sympathises with the dying monarch butterflies and she hopes to protect the endangered species. Dr. Ovid sets up a lab to explore the reasons why the butterflies changed their course and settled in the mountains. This displays his love and responsibility towards the environment like that of Dellarobia’s self-awareness. When she learns the effects of climate change and its consequences in the impending future, she feels disheartened. The view of million monarch butterflies on the tree branches makes her believe in great things. Dellarobia looks at the forest vision and interprets it as a spiritual element. She wonders at the burning trees, “Understanding for the moment some formula for living that transcended fear and safety. She only wondered how long she could watch the spectacle before turning away. It was a lake of fire, something far fiercer and more wondrous than either of those elements alone. The impossible” (22).

This appealing beauty of nature is indeed an indication of the end of the world. The novel thus shows Dellarobia’s environmental awareness and her personal growth towards her transformation into a strong, independent individual. She decides to part from her husband and lives with her two children. She also applies for college study and gets the help of Dr. Byron in getting a job in lab. Dellarobia goes speechless while being amidst the research team and when conversing with them. She understands, “Educated people had power” (172). Dellarobia considers possible answers for the

calamity explained to her. There was no easy way to talk about the known world unravelling into fire and flood due to manmade activities. She came up with a reliable word:“Polution,” she said. “You pollute the sky long enough, and it turns bad on you”(465).

Besides her college work Dellarobia decides to take up the lab work to earn money to support her family without her husband. As the monarch butterflies take flight finally, she also chooses her own way of life and becomes independent. At the end of the novel the monarch butterflies fly away from the mountains to begin a new life. Symbolically, Dellarobia also being transformed by them, faces a new beginning, “The sky was too bright and the ground so unreliable, she couldn’t look up for very long. Instead her eyes held steady on the fire bursts of wings reflected across water, a merging of flame and flood. Above the lake of the world, flanked by White Mountains, they flew out to a new earth” (597)Every creature has a vital role in the ecosystem. We should have respect and concern for our natural world. Dellarobia boldly plans to continue her studies and her lab work amidst the challenges. This transformation of her creates a self-identity in this patriarchal system of society.

CONCLUSION

Dellarobia, though has a wavering mind initially, asserts her identity and actively participates in the conservation of the natural world. Barbara Kingsolver’s strong protagonist is environmentally receptive and makes choices in favour of the environment and humanity. *Flight Behaviour*, thus, reflects the relationship of human beings with each other, with their surrounding place and details on a young woman and her genuine problems of the world in which she spreads her new wings. Thus, Barbara examines the environmental destruction on the earth and its effect on humans and nonhumans and creates environmental awareness to avoid the ecological crisis in near future.

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