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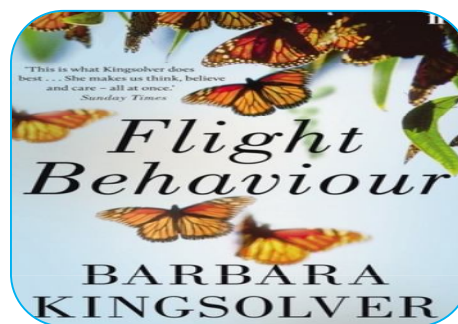
SEDUCED BY SCIENCE: REVISTING *FLIGHT BEHAVIOUR*

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ABSTRACT

Barbara Kingsolver's unique ecotext *Flight Behaviour* grows around the protagonist Dellarobia Turnbow and the Monarch Butterflies that have come to nest on the hill and the valley behind her house on a farm in Tennessee. Of the many occasions on which Dellarobia sights the butterflies, three are significant: the first time she sees them she too is poised for flight with her lover, the second time is when she sees how important they are for her son and the third, when she studies them scientifically. The narrative is framed by two aborted emotional entanglements. As a successful ecotext *Flight Behaviour* negotiates between the complex processes of nature, of those who are totally dependent on its vagaries and the very human tale of Dellarobia and her transformation, much like that of the butterflies who launch her on her flight to the future. The Biblical subtext adds yet another layer of possible interpretation to *Flight Behaviour*.



KEYWORDS: *Ecofeminism, Ecocriticism, The Book of Revelation.*

INTRODUCTION

Great expectations from a text are born of references. Students of Ecocriticism, especially those exploring the terrain of Ecofeminism are sure to come across numerous references to Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2016), as a landmark text in the area. Ecofeminism itself is as yet in a phase of expansion and any text which can act as a pointer, extremely welcome. Though Ecofeminism is generally neatly summed up as that branch of feminism which perceives a link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, it is more nuanced than that bald statement and *Flight Behaviour* reflects these nuances. The obvious connections between ecofeminism and the text are there. For example, Ecofeminism focuses on women on the margins, worldwide. People living at subsistence level face the worst impact of capitalism as they lose land and livelihood to its never ending appetite and women are its worst victims. Ecofeminism the branch of feminism closest to women facing the pain of poverty at subsistence level or lower—women of colour, *dalit* and tribal women, the displaced and dispossessed. Thusecofeminism escapes the accusation of being a White, Western and middle-class phenomenon hurled against feminism worldwide, while it often incurs the blame of being essentialist i.e. positing an essential feminine nature that is close to nature, by feminists themselves. Dellarobia Turnbow the protagonist of *Flight Behaviour* almost fits the bill— a farmer's wife, mother of two kids, a homemaker struggling to make ends meet and the farm pay in a lean season and a year of incessant rain. Cub and Dellarobia are poor, and the first half of the novel details the humiliations of poverty—they cannot afford to buy their children gifts for Christmas, Dellarobia haunts second hand stores

seeking stuff to buy for herself and her kids, Preston and Cordie, Cub apologises if he ever picks up a snack while working as a pick-up driver shovelling gravel to eke out a living. They are 'redneck poor'. The children, sheep, her in-laws Bear and Hester, and her church, mark the boundaries of Dellarobia's existence. Dellarobia is marginalised in her own family being dominated by Bear and Hester who own the farm, in the community, and in her country, as Tennessee is part of the Bible belt, ridiculed alike by comedians and liberals. But while the other women of her farming community appear to be fairly adjusted to a similar way of life, Dellarobia is not. She has questions which her prayer group leader cannot answer, she stands up to Hester in a way her husband cannot, and resents being made to babysit while the others are at work shearing sheep. Her rebellion is to be expressed by starting an extra-marital affair, when she first sees the butterflies—monarchs, 'King Billies', in their millions nesting in the hills behind her home. This phenomenon, the pivotal sighting of the butterflies, puts *Flight Behaviour* in a class of its own. The challenge climate change fiction faces is how to incorporate the natural with the human. With rare exceptions, nature has always been no more than a passive background in fiction, while the human action is foregrounded, a trend climate change fiction seeks to subvert.

The novel appears to be structured in two ways: the three 'sightings' and the two doomed attractions of Dellarobia Turnbow. Barbara Kingsolver draws subtle parallels between the butterflies and Dellarobia. Her size zero figure, her colouring (her russet hair for example), her short sighted eyes magnified by her glasses reflect her affinity for the butterflies, as does her home on the hillside. Like the russet monarch butterflies, she has taken refuge here after her natal home disintegrates after the death of her mother. She has tripped up by biology—pregnant before marriage, she rushes into marriage with Cub only to lose the child. She doesn't walk out of the marriage as she has no parents, no training and no skills. Dellarobia gives up on 'culture'—she had once hoped to go to college—and is absorbed into the world of 'nature'. She is a full time mother, housewife and helps out in various ways on the farm owned by her in-laws. However this emphasis on the vital processes of nature is not to reject the domain of nature, rather the depiction natural processes is in keeping with Laurence Buell's list of the characteristics of ecotexts. Throughout the novel we see her commitment to her two children. In fact she is choked by guilt when she finds her children neglected and wailing when she comes back from her failed flight to her lover. In keeping with the ecofeminist tenet of sustainability, ecofeminists point out nothing born on this earth can be sustained without nurture and here they differ sharply from Radical feminists who view motherhood as one of the causes of the oppression of women. Significantly, it is when Dellarobia mounts the hill behind her home for a secret assignation with her lover that she first sees the butterflies and mistakes them for fire. She is not wearing her glasses, and is amazed to see transfigured world before her. Every tree, every branch on the mountainside is alive and pulsating with butterflies. The air, the ground beneath her is all orange and russet, and a shaft of sunlight sets this radiant world pulsating. To the short sighted Dellarobia it appears flame like. Her mind schooled by her reading and informed by her faith equates it with the Abrahamic Burning Bush, though this is only indicated and not spelt out in the text. Certain it is that for Dellarobia the vision is no less than a beacon. It deflects her flight, restores her to her responsibility towards her children, lends her courage to stand up to Hester and eventually redirects her life. No wonder the motif of a beacon is repeated often in the early part of the novel.

Dellarobia sees the butterflies a second time in the company of her little son Preston. This time she has on her glasses, the steadying influence of her son and pouring rain to stabilise her. She sees the butterflies again, but this time it is through the eyes of her son. By now Dellarobia has attained celebrity status. Beginning with her church called The Mountain Fellowship, her local community, and gradually through media, in a wider community, Dellarobia is identified with the monarch butterflies. But the more she is sought after by the media as the saint who was prescient about the butterflies—Our Lady of the Butterflies—the more she realises how little she actually knows about the monarch butterflies and indeed about the natural world at all, even though she is married into a farming family deeply connected to the land and the sheep on the farm, and has lived in this small town in the mountains all her life. She is humbled by her ignorance and struck by the curiosity of her son Preston who is deeply interested in nature and whose questions she cannot answer. Again, it is through her

son's kindergarten friend Josefina, who earlier lived in Mexico, that Dellarobia becomes aware that the butterflies actually signal an ecological crisis. They have shifted from their original breeding ground in Mexico to Tennessee. So in this second significant interface with the butterflies, Dellarobia becomes increasingly aware of the questions which surround the butterflies. Earlier, they were a personal miracle, a conviction reinforced by her church. In this second significant 'sighting', they take on a more sinister meaning. They are migrants, fleeing from ecological disaster, much like Josefina and her parents.

The third significant sighting in *Flight Behavior* is when Dellarobia begins studying the monarch butterflies under a microscope, in the makeshift laboratory which Ovid Byron has set up in their barn. The deserted hillside behind Dellarobia's house where the butterflies have found refuge, now is the focus of several environmentalists and 'green' people. Byron and his team specialise in the species and they gradually co-opt Dellarobia, who is indeed transformed by the miracle on the hill. From a harassed mother and unimportant family member, to minor celebrity, to budding scientist who brings home the bacon, Dellarobia's transfiguration is gradual but inexorable. The catalyst in this process is Byron who arrives in remote Feathertown to study the monarch butterflies nesting on the hillside behind Dellarobia's house. Always susceptible, Dellarobia is greatly attracted to him and initially it is this attraction that pulls her gradually into the upper-upper intellectual circle of Byron and his students. She can see a similar intellectual curiosity in her son and is gratified that Byron is serious in his responses to little Preston's myriad questions, quite unlike Cub who can only say the sort of things grown up people do to humour children. Gradually Dellarobia comes to see that Byron is passionately involved in his work and the environment. Of the several possible responses to the ecological crisis that she sees represented on the hill which now teems with various 'greens', Dellarobia finds this one the most tenable—a scientific evaluation of the crisis on which the search for solutions can be based if not found. She herself sheds her romantic longings for Byron and transforms into someone who can be part of this endeavour. *Flight Behaviour* begins with Dellarobia's infatuation with a young linesman, but the narrative veers clear of this conventional plot of a married woman expressing her angst through an affair, in mid-novel Dellarobia is obsessed with Ovid. She tries to project an imaginary unhappy marriage onto Ovid, thus legitimising a romantic role for herself in his life. Kingsolver deflects this red herring as well... Ovid is happily married to a compatible wife, disabused of her romantic illusions, Dellarobia builds a career for herself. From being Ovid and his team's woman Friday, she gradually becomes more and more absorbed into the world of science and its methods. The butterflies have indeed redeemed her from a caterpillar to a winged creature winging toward the light. In future her life will be divided between her research—she is joining the college in Cleary—and her children to whom she wants to give more opportunities than the farm in Feathertown can offer.

As *Flight Behaviour* draws to a close, the Biblical subtext of the novel resurfaces. From the vantage point of the hill behind her house, on a morning when the melting ice is flooding the land, Dellarobia is witness to a Revelation-like phenomenon—the merging of floods of water and flame. As the water gushes down the hillside, the butterflies start leaving too. Their habitat destroyed, they flow out, a flood of flaming orange reflected in the gushing, overflowing water. Ironically, the flood destroys Dellarobia's habitat too. The prefabricated house that has been her home for so long shifts from its concrete foundation, before flowing off with the flood. Dellarobia, her children and perhaps Cub must now shift home too. 'Above the lake of the world, flanked by white mountains, they flew out to a new earth'.

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