

**HUMAN, NATURE, AND LITERATURE: AN EVOLVING
RELATIONSHIP WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BARBARA
KINGSOLVER'S *FLIGHT BEHAVIOUR***

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Abstract

Literature has long been a medium to reflect and reshape human perceptions of nature, often functioning as an agent of environmental awareness and change. The paper examines how industrialization, technological progress, and social transformation have distanced humans from the natural world and how literature, in response, has sought to restore ecological consciousness. Through an ecocritical and ecofeminist lens, Kingsolver's narrative is analyzed for its portrayal of environmental alienation, gender role, and climate change. The protagonist Dellarobia Turnbow's personal journey from isolation and disenchantment toward environmental awakening illustrates how literature can address pressing ecological issues and inspire social consciousness. This research paper examines the evolving relationship between humans and nature with special reference to Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*. It explores how literature reflects and influences ecological consciousness, using ecofeminist and ecocritical perspectives.

Keywords:- Human–Nature Relationship; Eco-criticism; Ecofeminism; Climate Change Literature; Environmental Alienation; Barbara Kingsolver; Flight Behaviour; Monarch Butterflies; Gender and Ecology; Literary Ecology.

The relationship between humans and nature has been a central theme in literature, reflecting the cultural, spiritual, and ecological values of different historical periods. From romantic celebrations of pastoral beauty to contemporary warnings of environmental collapse, literature has evolved to mirror humanity's changing attitudes toward the natural world. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012) explores the intersection of personal transformation, climate change, and ecological alienation through the life of Dellarobia Turnbow, a rural Appalachian homemaker whose encounter with a displaced colony of monarch butterflies catalyses a deeper understanding of environmental crisis and personal agency. This paper examines the evolving literary representation of human-nature relationships, drawing from eco-criticism and ecofeminism, and situates *Flight Behaviour* as a powerful narrative that challenges gendered environmental alienation while fostering ecological consciousness.

Literature has historically served as a mirror of humanity's relationship with nature. From the harmonious coexistence celebrated in indigenous oral traditions to the industrial anxieties of Victorian literature and modern climate-fiction narratives, literary works capture shifting

attitudes toward the environment. Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley emphasized nature as a moral and spiritual guide, while modern works often highlight ecological degradation and alienation. In the twenty-first century, environmental literature has become increasingly urgent, addressing issues such as climate change, species extinction, and sustainable living.

Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* offers a unique perspective on how environmental issues intersect with personal and social struggles. Dellarobia Turnbow's journey from domestic entrapment to ecological awareness parallels a broader narrative of human disconnection from and rediscovery of nature. This paper argues that *Flight Behaviour* not only highlights the ecological consequences of climate change but also critiques gendered roles and socio-economic alienation, presenting literature as a vehicle for environmental advocacy and personal transformation.

Eco-criticism, as defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, examines "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xix). It positions literature as a means to understand ecological crises and human responsibility. Similarly, Lawrence Buell emphasizes the importance of environmental texts that evoke ethical responses to ecological degradation (Buell 2).

Ecofeminism adds a gendered dimension to environmental discourse, highlighting how patriarchal exploitation of women parallels the exploitation of nature. Vandana Shiva, in *Staying Alive*, argues that "the marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity are interlinked processes" (Shiva 38). Kingsolver's narrative aligns with ecofeminist perspectives, using Dellarobia's maternal body and domestic life as metaphors for environmental extraction and alienation, while exploring how women's ecological consciousness can become a force for resistance and change.

Flight Behaviour opens with Dellarobia Turnbow on her way to commit adultery, seeking escape from her suffocating marriage and domestic monotony: "Her unfulfilled married life made her think of every other way to leave Cub, her husband" (Kingsolver 18). The setting—a declining Appalachian farming community—symbolizes both economic hardship and environmental alienation. Rural labor, once connected to land stewardship, has become mechanized and exploitative, reflecting a broader cultural disconnection from nature.

Dellarobia's domestic duties, particularly motherhood, are depicted as forms of bodily extraction: "She felt permanently caved in from those years she had spent with one child keening to draw milk out of her and another one fully monopolizing her surface. Effectively deep-mined and strip-mined simultaneously" (Kingsolver 26). This metaphor draws a direct parallel between environmental exploitation and the commodification of women's reproductive labor, underscoring ecofeminist concerns.

The displaced monarch butterflies that mistakenly migrate to Tennessee instead of Mexico serve as the novel's central ecological symbol. Their altered migration patterns, caused by climate change, represent the profound disruptions of natural systems. Dellarobia's first encounter with the butterflies is transformative: "The forest blazed with its own internal fire... It looked like the inside of joy" (Kingsolver 15). This awe-inspiring moment rekindles her connection to nature and catalyzes her shift from passive dissatisfaction to active engagement.

The butterflies also parallel Dellarobia's own displacement. Just as the butterflies are out of place, she too feels alienated from her community and her own life trajectory. Through scientific inquiry and environmental activism, Dellarobia begins to see herself as part of a broader ecological web, moving beyond personal despair toward collective awareness.

Dellarobia's initial alienation is compounded by gendered social expectations. She is defined almost exclusively as a wife and mother, yet she feels estranged from these roles: "Della compares herself to a woman stoned for the sin of motherhood when performing domestic work such as dressing her fussy daughter" (Kingsolver 127). Her dissatisfaction challenges the cultural trope that equates femininity with innate environmental care.

By linking her bodily experience to ecological exploitation, Kingsolver highlights how both women and nature are treated as expendable resources. Dellarobia's eventual transformation—joining scientific researchers, questioning traditional gender roles, and advocating for environmental protection—embodies ecofeminism's vision of women as agents of ecological and social change.

Dellarobia's journey mirrors a larger theme in environmental literature: individual awakening leading to collective responsibility. Initially isolated, she evolves into a participant in ecological discourse, helping scientists and questioning local logging practices. Her story suggests that environmental crises are deeply intertwined with socio-economic inequalities and gender dynamics. The monarch butterflies thus function not only as symbols of climate disruption but also as catalysts for personal liberation and communal ecological awareness.

Literature like *Flight Behaviour* does more than document environmental decline; it actively shapes cultural responses. Works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Richard Powers' *The Overstory* have similarly raised public awareness and influenced environmental activism. By emotionally engaging readers, literature fosters empathy for non-human life and challenges anthropocentric worldviews. Kingsolver's work exemplifies how narrative can bridge personal experience and global ecological issues, cultivating a sense of urgency and interconnectedness.

CONCLUSION

The evolving relationship between humans and nature is a prominent literary theme, reflecting shifting historical and cultural attitudes. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* exemplifies how contemporary literature addresses climate change, gender, and personal transformation. Through ecofeminist lenses, the novel critiques gendered alienation and environmental exploitation while portraying nature as a catalyst for personal and social awakening. Literature's power lies not only in reflecting ecological crises but also in inspiring change, offering new ways to imagine human roles within an interconnected ecological system.

Works Cited

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