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Environmentally Inflected: Human and Insect Behaviour in Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*

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Abstract

Behavioural patterns in insects and humans are to a large extent shaped by environmental patterns and social structures. Both adapt in response to change, resulting in survival or death. Migration on account of changes in environment, the need for survival is common to both species. Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* explores the behaviour of monarch butterflies and provides a platform to analyse the interconnectedness of all forms of life in navigating change. The life cycle of butterflies from the caterpillar to a butterfly and the changes involved in response to environment can be compared to changes undergone by humans in response to growth and altered environment. As Kingsolver uses the monarch butterflies as a metaphor for human response to environment, human and insect behaviour intertwine. This paper is an attempt to trace similarities between insects and humans in response to crises and change.

Keywords: Behavior, climate change, environment.

Canada and America experience temperature rise up to 50° Celsius. Flash floods devastate Germany and China. Europe decides to reduce carbon emissions by 55 percent. Recent news headlines have triggered panic across the world. Climate change, global warming, cloud bursts have become part of a toddler's phraseology. Devastations, debates and discussions loom large everywhere. Where is the world heading too? While scientists offer answers that are discussed and kept frozen,

litterateurs taking cue from Donald Worster, the environmental historian are also doing their part in restoring the planet by creating awareness. When a scientist turned writer spins a tale yoking these two possibilities it goes a long way in creating an environmental ethics through a language close to heart much like how children are influenced by stories. A scientist turned writer, Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*, which won the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2013 combines the author's sense of

place and knowledge in biology to weave a tale about the effects of global warming. "The climate system that raised us, and raised everything we now know as human culture and civilization, is now, like a parent, dead" (Wallece-Wells 18). The literary genre called climate fiction or 'Cli-fi' aims at exploring the truth enveloping the world and the complexities that underlie them often earning for them the alternate name of narratives of risk. A burgeoning of this genre points a finger to the crises that the planet has reached and often serves as a reminder to act in the present before an apocalypse sets in. These works often move from the human world with the objective of compelling the readers to think about the biotic world that do not resemble the lives of humans. The delicate ecosystems, the fragility of the natural world are portrayed with such enormity that they often succeed in making the readers believe, think and care at once. Fictional accounts of individuals and realistic accounts of the nonhuman world are often intended for personal transformation.

Flight Behaviour introduces the readers to Dellarobia Turnbow, who in a quest to satisfy her desires comes across a "burning place." The metaphorical reference to the burning place might even be a cue to the transformation that these place can undergo in recent years. The name Dellarobia has a reference to Della Robbia wreaths which brings together a collection of seasonal fruits and leaves that serve as a delightful arrangement for any season. The name of the protagonist may signify nature's flamboyance and the delightful world of butterflies, one of nature's most beautiful creatures that take up the whole story. The author might have used the name symbolically to indicate a character who experiences a turnaround in her character. It can be a further indication of the changes that scientists are requesting from countries and individuals with an attempt to cut down carbon footprint. At any rate, it is a change that is warranted. The bright orange colour of the monarch butterflies

resembling the burning bush at Mount Sinai enlightens the world of Dellarobia and turns the reader's attention to the insect world also that faces threat. According to "UN Report: Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented'; Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating' " of 2019 it is estimated that nearly 10% of insect species are also facing danger, though the picture regarding climate change threat for the insect world is not very clear. The move towards a second massive extinction is taking place at unprecedented rate. Retracing her steps, Dellarobia walks back from her pursuit of happiness to a study of insects and their lives for a protection of their lives. The initial journey of Dellarobia in search of a telephone man is the journey of the human seeking destruction of oneself and family and in the midst encountering the destruction of the whole world. Dellarobia has to make a choice. But her beliefs prevent her from her perusal of pleasure as the phenomenon she encounters enables her to pause and think and takes her to the crumbling world of butterflies. Mankind's greed to convert to money the life of insects awakens Dellarobia to the possibilities of a disappearing world. Religion and life in the changing world are brought together by Kingsolver to deliver a passionate tale on the effects of global warming.

Dellarobia's obsession with "the telephone man" sends her on a journey risking everything- "rocky, steep and dark" (*Flight* 15) signaling the climb for man to establish a harmonious relationship with the universe. An unusual sight - something like "a hornet's nest", "a down turned pine cone", "armadillo in a tree" (16) made her heart thump. The moment of recognition of nature going awry disturbs her but the thought of a pleasurable reward at the end of the climb automatically made her move forward. Faith steps in between for a moment to retrace her steps. Kingsolver introduces the new phenomenon of nature's displacement with a master stroke. The illusion of forest on fire is the result of displaced monarch butterflies. Overwintering propels the insects on their

migratory journey to avoid freezing. "Maintenance of low body temperatures to conserve lipids is one reason why migrant monarchs select these high mountain forests as their overwintering habitat" (Masters et al 458). The Turnbow farm becomes the roosting site of displaced butterflies. The phenomenon is narrated by means of a biblical metaphor

Brightness of a new intensity moved up the valley in a rippling wave, like the disturbed surface of a lake..... Trees turned to fire, a burning bush. Moses came to her mind and Ezekiel, words from Scripture that occurred at a certain space in her brain but no longer carried honest weight, if they ever had. Burning coals of fire went up and down among the living creatures. (*Flight* 19)

Dellarobia looks upon the burning trees as being brought there to save herself from her infidelity. The sight that she saw transmutes her as on her way back she thinks that nothing had changed. But it is a moment of discovery for Dellarobia, the point of transition of her character.

Not a thing on God's green earth had changed, only everything had. Or was she dreaming. A lake of fire had brought her back here to something. To what? A yard strewn with plastic toys and straggling grass devoid of the topsoil, thanks to her father-in-law's hasty job of bulldozing the pad for the house. (23)

There is a moment for the woman to recognize the difference. After having encountered something strange she recounts the place that she is living in - strewn with plastics and bulldozed for comfort. But Dellarobia gains the stature of a woman with insight when it is soon discovered that millions of butterflies had caused her to see the strange phenomenon taking place in her backyard. She had kept quiet till the point, the family had decided to move ahead with the logging. It was her intense desire to stop logging that prompted Dellarobia to speak of what she had seen without divulging,

as she herself was not aware of the truth. This presents her to her community as a woman receiving grace, a community that has still not come to terms like global warming and climate change. At the same time her father-in-law comes as a man who sees this as against his interest in logging: "Whatever the hell that is, it can't be a damn bit of good for logging" (73).

Kingsolver uses the character of the scientist Ovid Byron to describe the behaviour of the butterflies. The monarch butterflies are known for their overwintering migration "The monarch butterfly, *Danaus plexippus* (L.), in Mexico is the premier example of a life history involving active overwintering behaviour.... After several spring and summer generations in eastern North America, monarchs migrate up to 4500 km to central Mexico" (qtd. in Masters 458). This is scientific truth about monarch butterfly behaviour:

Tens of thousands of butterflies bask in the sun and fly about on clear and partly cloudy days. Other active behaviors include flights of up to 1 km to drink water; shivering and crawling or flying up off the ground; cascading from clusters when disturbed and then vigorous flapping on the ground; hovering flights above the trees when basking individuals are suddenly shaded; slow downslope colony movement; and in dry years, colony breakup and reformation over a few days as the butterflies move closer to water (qtd. in Masters 459).

Knowledge about this behaviour of insects are of interest to the scientific world and seldom does it reach the layman. "Monarchs couldn't make their own body heat, so they were paralyzed in the cold, unable to move until the sun warmed them to 55 degrees" (FB 198). Kingsolver's understanding of insect behaviour takes the readers to the nuances of butterfly life-stages of diapause, mating, mortality rate, temperature profile of the roost and even to the

microclimate of the firs in the farm. The butterflies during overwintering enter into different stages. Though Kingsolver admits that the phenomenon she described in the book did not take place, the minute details of insect behaviour she has described is true to the core and imparts to the readers a life that has little resemblance to human lives. The journey to save themselves and their species serves as a metaphor for Dellarobia to undertake a journey to raise awareness about climate change. Paralleling the butterflies, Dellarobia also undergoes a transformation in her life, once she recognises the truth about climate change.

The woman who dropped out of college is from then portrayed as a keen and studious character learning about the life of butterflies and trying what she could to protect their species. When her husband Cub pulls out a shopping cart of things like ant killer, Clorox, Krazy glue, Dellarobia quickly replies that they are nice Christmas gifts if everybody is planning suicide. Physical desires give way to Dellarobia's keen interest in the phenomenon at her farm. From making money over nature's phenomenon she learns about the migration of monarch butterflies from Mexico to her place. Ovid Byron the entomologist opens her eyes to the truth behind the phenomenon namely climate change. It also takes the readers on to the truth behind media reports where scientific warnings go unheeded and they are broadcast merely for increased viewership rather than action to save species as well as planet. Dellarobia's turnaround from an "underemployed" mind begins with her discovery of the roosting site of butterflies. As climate refugees, scientists and media rush into the place, Dellarobia's world also changes. She undergoes intellectual growth to the point of entering a work study programme to continue her college education. From merely assisting her mother-in-law in shearing sheep and taking care of her children, Dellarobia's world widens to include the threat faced by the world of humans and insects. She hears from Ovid

Byron- "Hurricanes reaching a hundred miles inland, wind speeds we've never seen. Deserts on fire. In New Mexico we are seeing the inferno. Texas is worse. Australia is unimaginably worse- a lot of the continent is in permanent drought. Farms abandoned forever" (*Flight* 81). Dellarobia and the inhabitants of Feather town are forced to think about their place. While the whole of her family and people cling on the belief of weather as directly related to God, Dellarobia is forced to change her beliefs. In her experience conversations about weather and nature always ended with the same line: "The Lord moves in mysterious ways" (204). Byron makes her imagine waking up one morning with eyes moved to the side of her head. The image of the relocated eyeball helps her to understand that the butterflies being in her place was a great mistake. This develops in her a feeling for the place and she is seen urging Ovid Byron to explain the whole situation to the people. She has developed in her an intimate connection to the place and she wants the logging to be stopped. This is the development of haptic perceptions in individuals. Intimate sense of place arising from haptic perceptions are directly related to the way one acts towards environment and places. She is thus moving from a stagnant life to a life of environmental ethics. There is the developing of eco-cosmopolitanism in her. "Eco-cosmopolitanism, then, is an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary "imagined communities" of both human and nonhuman kinds" (Heise 72). This creates a tie with the natural world, it emerges naturally through a sense of connection while other allegiances are artificially created. It also leads to the building of an "ethics of proximity" (Mayer 489) which is an identification with the global biosphere. Dellarobia's perceptions of global ecology are reshaped by eco-cosmopolitanism and ethics of proximity. She becomes an agent for risk sharing attempting to create a new community. She can lay the foundation for a new culture in her place. Dellarobia's change to a new cosmopolitan consciousness can create an

alternate global culture not merely based on theories but field work as offering a rich inventory for the risk at hand. It is an eco-cosmopolitanism environmentally inflected through sustained familiarity. The neutral term climate change may not convey the complete risk of the scenario but unnatural phenomenon at regions and locales like the displacement of butterflies has foregrounded this problem even in the laymen as it does in the college dropout. Dellarobia as a character inhabiting a small rural locale is unsettled through an exposure to a risk scenario and she transcends her community and connects herself to corporations working around the globe. From Feather town community she gets linked to three hundred and fifty.org. As she moves for continuing her education there is some form of "re-territorialisation" as a basis for ecological forms of awareness, global connectivity and a new kind of environmentalism. Butterflies try to overwinter, Dellarobia tries to assess a risk scenario and formulate a new land and environmental ethics. There is an attempt to resituate everyday practices and covey a vision of earth as a home for all. Dellarobia moves from a complex human identity into a world of ecological solidarity. But her transition was being a part of witnessing:

Humans are in love with the idea of our persisting, he said. We fetishize it, really, Our retirement funds, our genealogies. Our so called ideas for the ages.

I really hate this what you are saying. Just so you know.

Sorry, I am a doctor of natural systems. And this looks terminal to me.

.....

Well, she said, I guess seeing is believing..... People can only see things they already recognize. She said. They'll see if they know it. (*Flight* 390-1)

This sort of a syncretization begins when Dellarobia works in proximity with the

butterflies. The novel exposes the way boundaries between human world and insect world are made and trespassed as well. It is a means of shepherding towards survival. Human interaction with the environment is presented through the characters of Bear, Byron, Hester, Cub and Dellarobia with Dellarobia experiencing a change from a sense of place to a sense of planet.

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