

From butterflies to backyards: Ecoprecarity and everyday life in Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*

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Abstract: Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012) presents a powerful literary response to the complexities of climate change, social inequality and human vulnerability. Kingsolver is one of the supreme predominant writers in American literature. Most of her novels are considered as semi-autobiographical works. This novel set in Rural Appalachia, centres on the accidental discovery of a displaced colony of monarch butterflies and the transformation it triggers in Dellarobia Turnbow, an intelligent woman but stifled housewife. This paper explores *Flight Behavior* through the lens of ecoprecarity, a theoretical framework that foregrounds the entangled vulnerability of both human and nonhuman life in the face of environmental degradation and socio-economic marginalization. Through the character of Dellarobia demonstrates that climate change is not merely a global crisis but a deeply personal and domestic one, playing out in kitchens, barns and backyards. The novel suggests that effective environmental communication must include empathy, local knowledge and the capacity to listen across class and cultural divides. The monarch butterfly becomes a central symbol of ecological dislocation and aesthetic wonder, while also reflecting Dellarobia's personal transformation and the broader fragility of life under climate stress. The paper investigates how the novel bridges the gap between scientific knowledge and rural experience, revealing how class, gender and geography shape access to and trust in climate discourse.

Keywords: Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*, climate fiction, monarch butterflies, ecoprecarity

Introduction

In recent years, literary studies have perceived the emergence of environmental humanities as a vital interdisciplinary response to the environmental crisis of climate change. As the realities of the Anthropocene, a term used to denote the epoch in which human activity has become the dominant force shaping Earth's systems begin to

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permeate cultural consciousness, literature has taken urgent role in uttering the difficulties of ecological degradation, loss of biodiversity and the uneven distribution of environmental precarity. Climate fiction or “cli-fi” has thus become a significant genre through which writers imagine and critique the socio ecological entanglements of contemporary life. Barbara Ellen Kingsolver is one of the most famous female writers in American Literature. She mostly writes semi-autobiographical works. She is a contemporary author in America. Her works focus on the environment and the feminine. She received notable awards like the Pulitzer Prize. Her notable novels include *The Bean Trees* (1988), *Animal Dreams* (1990), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), *Prodigal Summer* (2000) and *Flight Behavior* (2012). The chosen work of Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* offers a rich grounded narrative of climate disruption and its intersection with rural life, gender and socioeconomic instability. This novel is set in the Rural Appalachian town of Feathertown, Tennessee. The protagonist Dellarobia Turnbow, a disillusioned housewife whose life takes an unexpected turn when she discovers a colony of monarch butterflies wintering in the woods behind her farm, a phenomenon caused by climate change. The presence of these misplaced butterflies serves as a visual and symbolic manifestation of environmental instability, portraying the attention of scientists, journalists, religious leaders and environmentalists. Especially compelling is not just its ecological theme, but its focus on the human dimensions of climate change particularly how it affects those living at the margins of education and wealth. This paper employs the theoretical lens of *Ecoprecarity Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture* (2012), was most notably developed and articulated by Pramod K. Nayar. In *Flight Behavior* portrays climate change not as a distant scientific thought but as a deeply felt lived experience. The term “ecoprecarity” adapted from Judith Butler’s broader concept of precarious life (2012). It refers to the fragile interdependent conditions of both human and nonhuman lives under environmental threat. As a critical framework, ecoprecarity foregrounds the ways in which environmental degradation disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations those already experiencing economic hardship, social exclusion, or gendered forms of oppression. By focusing on everyday characters like Dellarobia, Kingsolver reframes environmental catastrophe as not only a planetary emergency but a domestic, intimate crisis rooted in relationships, labour and land. This introduction situates *Flight Behavior* within the growing field of ecocritical and environmental literary studies, while also pointing

to the novel's unique contribution its articulation of ecoprecarity through the lens of Rural Appalachian life, maternal subjectivity and local resistance; how precarious lives, both human and nonhuman, are entangled in a shared ecological destiny. This article explores how Kingsolver blends personal transformation with ecological awareness, this study argues that *Flight Behavior* serves as both a cautionary tale and a literary space of resistance, where the ecological imagination is grounded in care, kinship and the possibility of ethical awakening in the most unexpected places not in laboratories or legislative halls, but in backyards, barns and the broken silences of women's lives.

Research methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in ecocritical theory with a specific focus on ecoprecarity. The analysis is textual and thematic, incorporating close reading of the novel for ecologically significant motifs, metaphors and character development. Theoretical synthesis of ecoprecarity is articulated by scholars such as Judith Butler, T.J. Demos, Rob Nixon and Anthony Burke. Contextual exploration of Rural Appalachian life illuminates the socioecological implications of climate change at the grassroots level. This interdisciplinary method draws upon environmental humanities, sociology and literary criticism to demonstrate the relevance of everyday life in climate fiction.

Literature review

Barbara Kingsolver's literary work has long engaged with environmental and ethical questions. Scholars such as Ursula Heise and Scott Slovic have recognized her as a major voice in climate fiction. *Flight Behavior* in particular has attracted critical attention for its portrayal of scientific discourse and the communication gap between rural populations and climate experts (Sanders; Toker).

However, few studies have approached the novel through the lens of ecoprecarity, a relatively new framework. Judith Butler's conception of precarious life and Rob Nixon's slow violence provide foundational insight into how environmental and human vulnerabilities intersect. T.J. Demos further advances this by emphasizing the political and ethical urgency of recognizing shared planetary precarities. This paper builds upon these theoretical insights to fill the gap in Kingsolver criticism by addressing how *Flight Behavior* makes ecoprecarity legible in everyday rural life.

Discussion

In *Flight Behavior*, the monarch butterfly emerges as a powerful and multi-layered symbol that connects ecological upheaval with human vulnerability. Barbara Kingsolver does not present the butterflies as mere background to the plot instead, they become central to the novel's meditation on climate change, displacement, beauty and survival.

the ecosystem of the earth and its various regions have been rendered fragile and precarious in the Anthropocene and represented in terms of the degradation and destruction of habitats, animal populations, climate and Nature, which we have always taken for granted is threatening to life itself with toxic landscapes all around. (Nayar 2019, 8)

Their unexpected appearance in the Appalachian Mountains far from their traditional wintering grounds in Mexico serves as a biological anomaly, but also as a metaphorical disruption in the natural and social orders. This displacement is at the heart of the novel's exploration of ecoprecarity. Traditionally, monarch butterflies follow a precise and inherited migratory route across North America, a delicate pattern passed down through generations. Their sudden misdirection to Feathertown is not just a scientific puzzle but a symbolic signal that the planet's ecological systems are unravelling. Kingsolver uses this unnatural migration to demonstrate the invisible, slow violence of climate change, a term coined by Rob Nixon to describe environmental degradation that is gradual and dispersed yet deeply destructive. The butterflies' misplacement is a subtle yet dramatic indicator that something fundamental in the natural world has gone wrong and this dislocation resonates with the character's own experiences of disorientation and insecurity. For Dellarobia Turnbow, the novel's protagonist, the butterflies represent both wonder and warning. At first, she interprets their arrival in almost religious terms, viewing them as a vision or miracle that might offer an escape from her stifling domestic life.

Every bough glowed with an orange blaze. "Jesus God," she said again. No words came to her that seemed sane. Trees turned to fire, a burning bush. Moses came to mind, and Ezekiel, words from Scripture that occupied a certain space in her brain but no longer carried honest weight, if they ever had (Kingsolver 2012, 19).

However, as she learns more from Ovid Byron, the African American scientist studying the butterflies, she comes to see them as a living testimony to climate change. The monarchs, fragile and vulnerable, mirror Dellarobia's own sense of entrapment and displacement within a

rigid socioeconomic and gendered structure like her they are at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

The monarch butterfly represents precarity and beauty and their delicate wings and temporary lifespan embody the fragility of life both human and nonhuman under threat from environmental collapse, displacement and disruption. Just as the butterflies have lost their natural migratory path, the people of Feathertown face lost opportunities, broken traditions and unstable futures. Transformation and hope as creatures that undergo metamorphosis, monarchs are also symbols of change and renewal. Dellarobia their presence marks the beginning of an intellectual and emotional awakening, an ecoconsciousness rooted not in privilege but in pain, wonder and critical awareness. As well, Kingsolver uses the butterflies to highlight the disconnection between scientific discourse and public awareness. The very word Tennessee made those audiences burst into laughter, she'd heard it.

They would never come see what Tennessee was like, any more than she would get a degree in science and figure out the climate things Dr. Byron described. Nobody truly decided for themselves. There was too much information. What they actually did was scope around, decide who was looking out for their clan, and sign on for the memos on a wide array of topics (Kingsolver 2012, 228).

While Ovid Byron tries to communicate the significance of their arrival in terms of climate science, the local community initially interprets it through religious, mystical, or sensational lenses. This tension reflects a broader issue in climate communication how facts are received, misunderstood, or ignored when they challenge deeply held cultural beliefs or when they emerge in contexts of economic hardship and social conservatism.

The monarch butterflies assist as living metaphors for ecoprecarity. Their vulnerability and haunting beauty remind readers that environmental conversion is not a distant intangible issue, it is a deeply intimate morally urgent reality that touches every corner of life from global ecosystems to isolated farmsteads. Through adjusting her narrative on these creatures, Kingsolver transforms them into a narrative device that bridges science, emotion and ethics showing that climate change is not just about polar bears or statistics, but about the fragile pulse of life itself flapping just outside our backdoors.

Dellarobia as picture of the ecoprecarity

Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* places the character of Dellarobia Turnbow at the center of its narrative not only as a character suffering

from personal disturbance but as a powerful literary embodiment of ecoprecarity the condition where ecological instability and social vulnerability intersect. Through Dellarobia, Kingsolver personalizes the theoretical crisis of climate change grounding it in the everyday struggles of a woman caught between environmental catastrophe and domestic confinement. “They would say the same thing she’d heard her mother-in-law tell Cub: that Dellarobia was a piece of work” (Kingsolver 2012, 13). Dellarobia is a young mother in her late twenties, living in Rural Appalachia, married into a farming family that is both financially strained and socially conservative. Her life is marked by early motherhood, intellectual stagnation and unrealized potential. She is intelligent and curious but has had her ambitions stifled by economic limitations and cultural expectations. This stalled potential reflects the broader sense of entrapment that characterizes communities living on the margins communities that are most exposed to ecological shifts but least equipped to address them. Kingsolver appeals to a subtle parallel between Dellarobia’s personal disorientation and the dislocation of the monarch butterflies; just as the butterflies arrive in the wrong place at the wrong time. Dellarobia finds herself misplaced in a life that does not fit her identity or aspirations. “She found herself still rooting for this sliver of a generation that had made its way down the precarious mountain to rest on a blighted orchard” (Ibid, 581). Her spontaneous decision to hike into the woods anticipating an affair acts as a symbolic crossing of thresholds. Instead of finding escape, she encounters the miracle of the butterflies which sets in motion her awakening not just to nature, but to her own inner life and activity.

This awakening coincides with her exposure to scientific discourse, especially through her collaboration with Ovid Byron, the entomologist studying and researching butterflies. Dellarobia becomes an association character between the academic knowledge and the local community’s suspicion, yet she also experiences how environmental knowledge fails to empower when systemic inequality persists. Despite her growing understanding of climate change, Dellarobia is still tethered to a socioeconomic reality that constrains her self-determination dependent on her husband’s family lacking access to higher education and constantly judged by community norms. This tension illustrates the heart of ecoprecarity knowing the crisis but lacking the means to respond to it effectively.

Dellarobia’s gendered experience also enhances another layer to her precarity. Kingsolver paints her as emotionally burdened by motherhood,

emotionally isolated and often dismissed by those around her. Yet she emerges as a perceptive observer of both people and the natural world and it is through her eyes that the reader comes to grasp the beauty, danger and urgency of the butterflies' arrival. Her transformation is not only ecological but epistemological she begins to see the world and herself, through a sharper lens, asking deeper questions about survival, responsibility and the future. Dellarobia's story speaks to the disproportionate burden placed on women, particularly rural women, in the age of ecological crisis. She performs invisible labor domestic, emotional, intellectual and her journey shows how climate change is not gender neutral. While environmental discourses often focus on policy, statistics, or biodiversity, Kingsolver insists that we also attend to the domestic sphere where ecological and emotional vulnerabilities converge.

Science, class and communication

Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* presents a compound interplay between science, class and communication, highlighting how environmental knowledge is produced circulated and often resisted within socially stratified communities. The novel explores the gap between scientific understanding and public belief showing how this divide is not merely about access to information but deeply embedded in issues of class identity, cultural values and mistrust. The character of Ovid Byron, a Caribbean American scientist studying the displaced monarch butterflies represents formal scientific authority. He arrives in Feathertown with the tools, language and urgency of climate science determined to understand the environmental anomaly and share its implications with the broader world. However, his efforts to explain the butterflies' misplacement and the role of global warming are met with suspicion and indifference by the local Appalachian community. As he conveyed the things of science they could accept the things and some of the things Dellarobia learned from him. This tension reflects a broader cultural divide between those who speak the language of data, models and environmental forecasts and those whose knowledge is rooted in daily survival, tradition and lived experience. Kingsolver shows how class based experiences shape the reception of science. The residents of Feathertown, many of whom struggle with poverty and limited education do not reject science out of ignorance but because it often comes from outsiders who do not share their values or hardships. "Humans are hardwired for social community," he said (Kingsolver 2012, 446). For them, the language of science can seem alienating, condescending, or

irrelevant in the face of more immediate concerns like debt, crop failure, or family responsibilities. When scientific discourse enters such communities, it risks being interpreted not as helpful truth but as exclusive intrusion, especially when it challenges deeply held beliefs or religious worldviews. This communication gap is further complicated by media distortion and political manipulation. Kingsolver introduces scenes in which national reporters oversimplify or sensationalize the situation, portraying the townspeople as either backwards or pitiable. These portrayals reinforce stereotypes and widen the rift between scientific narratives and local trust. The novel critiques not only the failure of science to reach ordinary people, but also the failure of media and institutions to respect the cultural complexity of the communities most affected by ecological change.

Dellarobia Turnbow becomes a key figure in bridging this divide. Although she starts out with little formal education, she is deeply curious and observant. Her growing relationship with Ovid Byron and his research team reveals how scientific communication can succeed when it is grounded in mutual respect, patience and human connection. Dellarobia does not simply absorb scientific facts and she interprets them through the lens of her own experiences, emotions and social context. Her evolving understanding becomes a model for inclusive environmental literacy, showing that ordinary people are capable of complex ecological thought when approached with care and dignity. “Stop the logging, stop the lies! Save the monarch butterflies!” (Ibid, 324) Kingsolver thus uses *Flight Behavior* to argue that science must meet people where they are not just physically, but socially and emotionally. Effective communication must navigate the cultural geographies of class, avoiding assumptions about intelligence or ignorance. The novel suggests that climate change cannot be addressed through facts alone; it requires storytelling, empathy and a willingness to listen across divides. *Flight Behavior* reveals that the climate crisis is also a crisis of communication and trust. It is not enough to know the science; people must feel that it matters to their lives and futures. Bridging the gap between scientific knowledge and everyday understanding requires breaking down hierarchies, building relationships and respecting the intelligence of lived experience even in the most remote backyards.

This study reveals several significant findings regarding the intersection of eco-precarity, gender, class and environmental consciousness in *Flight Behavior*. Barbara Kingsolver’s novel demonstrates how climate change is not an abstract scientific

phenomenon, but a deeply personal and embodied experience, especially for those who inhabit socially and economically precarious positions. The findings of this research are organized under key thematic revelations that emerged through close textual analysis and theoretical engagement.

Ecoprecarity as embodied experience

The novel exemplifies that environmental vulnerability is experienced most acutely by those already living in forms of social and economic precarity. Dellarobia Turnbow's life is marked by financial instability, limited access to education, gendered expectations and rural isolation. Her exposure to the effects of climate change represented by the arrival of the monarch butterflies mirrors the precariousness of her own life. The research finds that Kingsolver's narrative strategy blurs the boundary between ecological crisis and personal crisis, suggesting that the health of the planet is inseparably tied to the well-being of individuals and communities.

Symbolism of the monarch butterflies

The monarch butterfly functions as a rich ecological and metaphorical symbol within the novel. The butterflies' disrupted migration becomes a signifier of a disordered climate system. Yet they are also figures of wonder, beauty and transformation. The study finds that this dual symbolism reflects the dual nature of ecoprecarity; it is both a site of existential risk and a potential catalyst for personal and communal awakening. Dellarobia, the butterflies initiate a profound journey of intellectual growth, emotional honesty and ecological awareness. The science-class divide highlights Kingsolver's critique of the communication gap between climate scientists and working-class communities. Ovid Byron represents scientific experts but his language and urgency often fail to resonate with the local population. The study reveals that class-based differences in access to language, education and media heavily influence how climate information is received. Kingsolver suggests that the failure to effectively communicate climate change to vulnerable populations is not merely a matter of literacy but of cultural disconnection and systemic neglect. The novel underscores the gendered nature of environmental precarity. Dellarobia's role as a mother, wife and caregiver reflects the unequal burden women often bear in times of crisis. This study finds that Kingsolver places emotional and ecological labour traditionally performed by women at the center of environmental ethics. Dellarobia's gradual empowerment challenges the patriarchal structures

of her community and models a form of resistance rooted in knowledge, care and observation. The study shows that this narrative choice affirms the ecological significance of ordinary lives and encourages a bottom-up, community oriented understanding of climate responsibility. Transformation through environmental consciousness finally, this paper finds that *Flight Behavior* encourages a hopeful but realistic vision of ecological transformation. Dellarobia's intellectual awakening does not solve the larger climate crisis, but it signifies the importance of individual agency within a collective struggle. Kingsolver's novel affirms that when people begin to see their lives as interconnected with ecological systems, they become capable of new kinds of resistance, empathy and responsibility.

Kingsolver recommends that one of the primary steps toward solving ecological problems is developing environmental empathy, the ability to care about nature and understand how deeply connected to it. In the novel, Dellarobia starts to notice changes in the natural world around her, especially the arrival of the monarch butterflies. As she learns more about their journey and the effects of climate change, she begins to feel a strong emotional connection to their struggle. This kind of empathy comes from close observation and personal stories, not just from reading scientific articles. Kingsolver believes that if people can see nature with attention and emotion like Dellarobia does they will be more likely to care for it. Stories, especially those rooted in everyday life, help people connect their own struggles with those of the environment. Encourage people to pay attention to nature in their daily lives and to share stories that help others feel connected to the environment.

Decentralized environmental education

The novel shows that climate education should not only come from top scientists or distant institutions, but also from within communities. Dellarobia learns about climate change not in a classroom, but by talking to scientists, watching the butterflies and thinking about her own life. Kingsolver advocates that knowledge can be dominant when it attaches science with people's values, culture and experiences. Often, rural or working class communities' impression is left out of climate discussions because the language of science can be technical or disconnected from their daily lives. Kingsolver shows that if education is made more relational, local and practical, it can inspire more people to get involved. Create learning spaces that mix scientific facts with local experience and make education more personal and community-based.

Ethical reorientation through care and solidarity Kingsolver requests for a change in how we treat both people and nature. She shows that we must act not out of fear or guilt but out of care, attention and shared responsibility. Dellarobia begins to question her place in the world and starts to care not only for her children but for the butterflies, the land and even strangers like the scientists. This sense of connection makes her stronger and more hopeful. The novel encourages us to build community solidarity, where people support each other through climate challenges. It also asks us to treat animals, plants and the earth not as resources to use, but as living beings we depend on and must protect. Build communities that care for each other and the environment and make kindness and respect a central part of how we respond to climate change.

In *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver suggests that the solution to ecoprecarity does not lie in grand actions alone. It lies in small, thoughtful changes paying attention to nature, telling stories, teaching others in meaningful ways and building stronger, more caring relationships with both people and the environment. These are not just environmental solutions, they are ethical choices, ones that ask us to live more gently and responsibly on the earth.

Conclusion

This novel expresses a powerful story about ecoprecarity, a term that means living with both environmental dangers and social problems like poverty, lack of education and gender inequality. The novel shows how climate change is not only about rising temperatures or melting ice caps, but also about how real people, especially those living in difficult situations, experience it in their everyday lives. Through the image of the monarch butterflies which end up in the wrong place due to climate disruption Kingsolver gives us a symbol of nature in danger. But these butterflies also represent beauty, change and hope. When Dellarobia, a poor and frustrated woman in a small rural town, discovers the butterflies, it begins a transformation in her own life. She starts to see the world differently and begins to think for herself, ask questions and learn.

Kingsolver shows that climate change is deeply personal and emotional, especially for people like Dellarobia who live in rural areas, struggle with money and are often left out of the bigger conversations about science and the environment. She makes us understand that climate issues are connected to gender and class. Women in poor communities often suffer the most, yet their voices are rarely heard by connecting human lives with the health of ecosystems. Kingsolver is asking readers

to think differently about the environment. She wants us to see that we cannot fix climate change without understanding the real, everyday struggles of people who live close to the land. The novel suggests that solutions to environmental problems must include the experiences and wisdom of ordinary people, not just scientists and politicians. In the end, *Flight Behavior* is a call to care for each other and for the earth. It teaches us that real change comes when we listen to unheard voices, when we care for the world around us and when we realize that human life and nature are deeply connected.

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