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THE CHOICE OF FIGHT OR FLIGHT IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S FLIGHT BEHAVIOR

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Abstract:

The novel *Flight Behavior* deals with the realities of global warming and the significance of the awareness of climate change and its impact on people's life. Kingsolver shows how the environmental awareness changes the protagonist's life in a positive manner. Dellarobia, the female protagonist, tries to make sense of the various climate caused wonders that happens around her home. She has chronic fight with overbearing in-laws and well-intentioned but ineffective husband, Cub. She experiences something but she cannot explain it; different factions of religious leaders, environmentalists, climate scientists, politicians are trapping her in the center of the conflict and ultimately it opens up her world. This paper explores whether the fight or the flight is the choice of the protagonist in critical situations in her personal life and the changing climatic hazards in her farm lands owned by the agro community in the novel, *The Flight Behavior*.

Discussions, talks, writings and warnings are immensely carried out by the media almost daily. Human need accelerated by science and technology does not prevent human beings from increasing the warmth of the globe. Detrimental procedures and proceedings of the people are the facts and causes of global warming. But they are unwilling to adjust and solve the everyday inconveniences and minor issues for the practical comforts. As these amalgamate it is a massive detrimental step towards massive destruction that would certainly be caused by exploited and irritated nature. Although it surfaces here and there, the media never fails to bring it to the knowledge of the people who forget it, or are unmindful of the future issues. The message must reach them, which would disturb their emotions and leave a permanent impression in their thought and mind. Writers fictionalize the fact and try to impact the message by making the readers emotionally touched.

Thus fictions play a vital role in instructing people with facts. J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Burning World* (1963). Stephen Baxter's *The Flood*, Atwoods' Volume V, Issue IV April 2017

Madd Adam, Jennifer Egan's, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Cleara Hume's *Back to the Garden*, Adam Robert's *The Snow* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* deal with the consequences of sudden changes in the climate which affects the people and the sources of their life. Shanon Bell in her *Our Roots Deep as Ironweed* writes on the exploitive practices which result in mixing of coal ash, flooding, landslides and soil erosion. Barbara Kingsolver discusses the grave results of global warming and climate change in her *Flight Behavior* and *Prodigal Summer* by making the protagonists realize the reality of the changing climatic condition. Kingsolver warns that the future generations have to live in the danger zone.

Gradually the books would continue to impress readers and make them realize that the actions of humanity tremendously affect the nature that it turns to humanity with its extremes. Then humanity cannot fight against it but rather has to fly away from the world leaving the body to decay. Apart from the health hazards and ozone depletion it will reduce population due to want of food because of changing climatic conditions that directly affect production of grains, cereals, fruits and vegetables. Mark Maslin in his *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction* says that, "So the inability of many people to afford basic food, leading their malnutrition and starvation, can be linked directly to the speculation on food prices on the global markets in London, New York and Tokyo" (84-85).

Barbara Kingsolver is a contemporary American writer and bestselling novelist. She utilizes her novels, not only to entertain readers, but also to engage them in humanitarian, political, social, feminist and environmental issues. She tries to bring an environmental awareness to her readers in both her fiction and nonfiction. According to Kingsolver, literature is a wonderful tool for social changes and it has the power to wake up people to their responsibility. She provides revealing pictures of humanity's interdependence with the environment and informs the reader that man is not separate from nature, but rather an integral part of interconnected system. Through novels like *The Bean Trees*, *The Poison Wood Bible*, *Prodigal Summer*, and *The Flight Behavior*, she brings out the effects of humanity's belief that every choice and act of human beings affect the entire eco system that sustains human beings. She reveals how a closer and humble relationship with nature is important for humans to understand about themselves their relationship with others.

The writer's latest novel *The Flight Behavior* narrates the life of a young mother with two children on a failing farm in rural Tennessee. Dellarobia, the female protagonist, tries to make sense of the various climate caused wonders that happen around her home. She fights

with a frequent grief that happens before the novel takes place as well as her overbearing in-laws and well intentioned but ineffective husband, Cub. She experiences a phenomenal vision but she cannot explain it; different factions of religious leaders, environmentalists, climate scientists and politicians are trapping her in the center of the conflict and ultimately opening up her world. This paper explores whether the fight or the flight is the choice of the protagonist in the novel, *The Flight Behavior*.

The story is developed from the young woman protagonist who attempts to transgress the boundaries of marriage to fulfill her emotional requirements through another young man who lives behind the farm over the hills. She is forced to take her first flight due to the imprisoning and exploitive attitude of her husband and in-laws. Dellarobia a bright young girl living in Eastern Tennessee has never been given an opportunity for education beyond schooling, to touch and own a computer or fly in an airplane. She has been knocked into a patriarchal imprisonment of marriage at the age of seventeen and never allowed to travel outside the countryside of Feather town. Her tryst begins after she has become the mother of two children in her late twenties. On her way to the hill she happens to see monarch butterflies covering the tree and foliage like an orange carpet.

At first she sees the reflection of the trees with the butterflies in the river water which appears like flames rising from the water that she is made to believe as if the water is on flames. Then when she looks at the trees it is a vision that disrupts her plan. In her first step to free herself from the domestic gloom and patriarchal suppression she is turned to self introspection which prevents her from walking towards her lover's house. Her description of the butterflies in terms of vision draws the attention of the village community, tourists and media people. From Dellarobia attention turns to the butterflies that it becomes like a tourist's spot.

The novel *Flight Behavior* deals with the realities of global warming and the significance of the awareness of climate change and its impact on people's life. Kingsolver shows how the environmental awareness changes the protagonist's life in a positive manner. The epic vision of orange colour covering the trees are monarch butterflies hanging on tree leaves or branches. The monarchs have shifted their home place and nesting ground on account of climate change. As their habitat is destroyed in the wake of climate change they have migrated to the southern Appalachian Mountains from Mexico. This migration of butterflies has transformed the life of Dellarobia when she comes across the view of

butterflies covered trees. Her religious upbringing makes her to think that she has seen a vision on the mountain which is really an ominous sign or ecological disaster. By these thoughts and visions, she gets back to her family and interprets it as a spiritual vision. It draws the attention of the folk to visit the place.

The place is owned by Bear, Dellarobia's father-in-law and her mother-in-law Hester, decides to earn money through charging spectators for a view. But Bear plans to sell the land for logging that would kill the butterflies. Dellarobia may be a member of the Turnbow family but she can't take part in any decision making among them. She always conveys her opinion through her husband or her mother in-law. In the matter of logging, Bear never gives up his plan to cut off the trees and he does not even care about the butterflies and their habitat in the farm. Her anger grows throughout the novel, and she resents toward those who are unaware about the consequences of the changes as she is. Kingsolver reveals in her interview about *Flight Behavior* the defective belief that humans are dominating the species, and every other part of nature is subject to humanity's ownership and control:

If you ask a monarch what are people are [sic] good for, they would say, absolutely nothing. Humans are set decoration, something to land on if you ask any species are important, they would say we are. Every one of us thinks we're the only species that matters. We think all butterflies do is flutter around because we don't understand their agenda – it looks random to us. The more you know about a monarch, the more you'll see them like Japanese businessmen. They're very driven (Crossen).

Byron enlightens the people with the knowledge that the sudden appearance of monarch butterflies in Appalachian mountain which had never been the destination of the migrating monarchs is only due to the effects of global warming which results in unexpected rains, snow and hot weather condition. Dellarobia and her hometown people who considered and believed the appearance of butterflies as a miracle and vision are disappointed to realise that the monarch butterflies are confused due to changing climatic conditions and not diverted from their traditional and original roosting site of Mexican mountains to Appalachian hillside. Ovid Byron gradually imparts Dellarobia and her country folk to an awareness of global climate change and its disastrous effects on climate, soil, water and the threat to existential possibilities for all living beings. Dellarobia's blurred vision of the butterflies as the burning bush and flames from the water is a moral threat to the collective future of the humanity. It is a symbolic representation of the evaporating water due to hot

weather conditions, and dried greenery setting on fire. But the butterflies sought refuge in Appalachian due to the warm climate in Mexico.

Byron appoints Dellarobia as an assistant in his research team which creates an act of self awareness and responsibility towards natural surroundings. She acquires self confidence through her work with Byron's research. Her environmental awareness helps to save the butterflies from dying by shifting them to a warmer place. He says that "Science doesn't tell us what we should do. It only tells us what is" (FB 320). She wonders when Byron explains her about receding coral reef and endangered species and insects and also expresses his sad feelings "What was the use of saving a world that has no soul left in it, continents without butterflies and sea without coral reefs" (FB 317). These lines make clear of the people's anthropocentric attitude towards nature. Nature is created by God for enjoying the source not for exploiting and dominating them. It is also a living companion of humans. Human rule this earth, have a moral responsibility to protect whatever exists in this universe.

Dellarobia's knowledge about the pathetic condition of the butterflies, and an awareness to protect nature, birds, and animals takes her back to an innocent playful period of girlhood when children usually play imitating nature, animals and birds. It changes her attitude towards her in-laws and children that she is willing to accommodate their playing even if it is demanding more domestic chores.

If her kids wanted to pull everything out of the laundry basket to make a birds nest and sit in it, fine. Dellarobia could even sit in there with them and incubate, if she so desired. Household chores no longer called her name exclusively. She had an income. She'd never before understood how much her life in this little house had felt to her like confinement in a sinking vehicle after driving off a bridge Scooping at the toys and dirty dishes rising from every surface was a natural response to inundation. To open a hatch and swim away felt miraculous (FB 286).

Her environmental consciousness gives the courage to fight against her unpleasant mother in law through this and she could also face the reality of her dead marriage. As butterflies take flight at the end of the novel she is also freed from her trapped domestic life. One must understand one's significant role on this earth, Dellarobia comes to know her real problem is not only hers but also of the humans altogether. She realizes the lack of people's responsibility to natural surroundings. Her environmental conscience helps to find her real identity which leads her free from trapping of the patriarchal society and her family.

Byron an environmental research scientist arrives at Feathertown country to study the reasons for the mitigation of monarch butterflies. Monarch butterflies would spend the winter in Mexico but they have flown away from Mexico to Feather town occupying the tree tops on the mountainside in eastern Tennessee, because of the increased heat level in Mexican weather. Ovid Byron a professor in Devary University in Mexico, who is an entomologist, arrives and sets up a research site on Dellarobia's farm. He tries to study about the sudden and unexpected reason for monarch butterflies shifting their habitat to southern Appalachian mountain. Their habitat is threatened not only in Mexico but also in Appalachian, because of constant rains and freezing temperatures. This drastic climate change affects the life span of monarch butterflies.

The sight of glowing orange tree tops stops Dellarobias' desire to commit adultery and changes her life. Dellarobia wants to break away from the oppressive domestic ruling of her in laws and husband. Like the butterflies she wants to escape from the disharmony of martial ties, grinding poverty and disappointments which remained unsuitable for existence. The house and relations have become dead to see her emotion and biological requirements. Although she is aware of the consequences of transgression she is unable to withstand and fight against the emotional and physical oppression that she decides to fly away from the place. Seeing the butterflies as an apocalyptic vision she returns to her family. Dellarobia perceives it as a moral teaching which directs her to the future welfare of her family and children. Dellarobia and her folks are given to the scientific fact about the sudden appearance of the butterflies and they learn about the environmental issues when Byron an environmental researcher arrives at the place to study the phenomenon. Byron explains:

A continental ecosystem breaking down. Most likely, this is due to climate change. Really I can tell you I'm sure of that. Climate change has disrupted this system. For the scientific record, we want to get to the bottom of that as best we can, before events of this winter destroy a beautiful species and the chain of evidence we might use for tracking its demise. It's not a happy scenario (FB 228-229).

Dellarobia and her farm community people are not the cause nor that they do anything that affect the climate and increase the warmth of spheres. Rather they are simple country folk who do not use computers, airplanes and rarely enter into the town area for entertainment and shopping. They are poor people who could provide only for indispensable things like food, shelter and clothing. These basic things are self made and insufficient. Like

the butterflies they are nature bound and do not interrupt with the natural phenomenon with the extensive scientific equipments. Unfortunately the two are the immediate victims of the irregular seasons of climate change which they are unable to withstand or fight against that they try to escape. But the changing climate and unexpected rain or shine have disrupted their migration that they settle on the foliage of farm land trees.

Dellarobia has learnt more about the cause and consequences of interrupting and exploiting nature. While Cub is thoughtful of logging in the Christmas gift shop Dellarobia tells him:

[w]hen you clear-cut a mountain it can cause a landslide. I'm not crying wolf here, Cub, it's a fact. You can see it happening where they logged over by the Food King, there's a river of mud sliding over the road. 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. (FB 170-171)

She has learnt it from Byron and Internet but Cub has a natural awareness and threat that the butterflies foretell something which is beyond his understanding. As farming community these people are not able to see the climatic changes and phenomenon in nature in a scientific way. They differ from them they do not want to associate themselves with the environmentalists and scientists who always talk about global warming and threats of nature. The agro community is the prime one who is directly affected by global warming and threats of nature. They have shaped their lifestyle and cultivation according to the rhythms of nature. Failing rain and burning sun deprive them of the source of life. Poverty and necessity drive them to cut the woods for money but they are unable to link the failing rain and burning sun, with deforestation; they fail to grasp the cyclic effects of every action altering the cycles of nature.

Global warming, climate changes and the voice raised by writers, rebellious people, media and many other forms and associations are the reality. But the real reality is that humanity has come a long way from natural way of leading life and living in harmony with nature. As Cub fears it is the butterflies and agro population today and it will continue to reduce of stamina of human resource and who will redeem the earth and its weather cycles. The machines and bombs cannot do it obviously As Mark Maslin in his *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction* writes, "This demonstrate the vulnerability to the effects of global warming of many developing countries, whose economies often rely heavily on one or two

agricultural products, as it very difficult to predict the changes that global warming will cause in terms of crop yield and its cash equivalent” (93-94). The Appalachian folk are not given time to grasp what is happening around them. A sudden rain surrounded and submerged the area. Dellarobia watched the flooding waters: “All morning she’d listened to water pouring through the huge metal culvert under the road, echoing its thunderous of inundation over those that came in on the radio. Now that roar was engulfed, the culvert had been overwhelmed and the road was broad, muddy river” (FB 431).

Much of a hue and cry is raised all over the world. Everyone is conscious of the global warming, environmental pollution and changing climatic condition. Although there is a strong resistance against hydro-carbon plumping, industrial waste and the dumping of plastic and techno wastes, not even a very few could analyze and bring out the means and methods of solving the problem or finding out an alternative. With the vast strides of science and technology people can never think of a reversal rather they have to promote redemptive measures. Dellarobia feels that flying away is the only means of escape but realizes that she has to fight against the odds and overcome the adversities in life. Like her everyone in the world should not think of escaping but strenuously fight against harmful measures and effects of science and technology.

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