

Importance Of Ecofeminism And Cultural Implications In Barbara Kingsolver's Flight Behaviour

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is a movement which connects degradation and exploitation of the natural resources and the oppression and suppression of women. Bringing together feminism and environmentalism, ecofeminism argues that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are consequences of patriarchy and capitalism. Ecofeminism suggests that women, when act against the social oppressions, will get enough power to face any issues. Cultural studies seek to investigate the ways in which cultures produce. Barbara Kingsolver's novel, Flight Behaviour discusses the effects of global warming on butterflies as well as human beings. It explores the environmental themes and highlights the potential effects of global warming on the Monarch butterflies. The novel deeply highlights the role of women in an environmentally degraded ecosystem by scrutinizing the life of women

characters in the novel, especially of the protagonist Dellarobia. The present study analyses the cultural and eco feminine interventions of the novel, Flight Behaviour.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Cultural studies, Cultural Ecofeminism, Climate fiction.

Introduction

Feminist literary criticism is literary criticism suggested by feminist theory. It uses the principles and ideology of feminism to account the language of literature. One of the most referenced classic ecofeminist books, Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her written by Susan Griffin offers a description of what misogyny is and means in society. It also discusses about the western culture of language and science by which women and nature are subjected to male domination. In Vandana Shiva's Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development, writer is regarded as the founding mother of ecofeminism, discusses the link between ecological crisis, colonialism and the oppression of women. Consideration towards animals is

an integral part of ecofeminism. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (1990) written by Carol J Adams is a debate on the surrounding animals' rights as well as society's ingrained misogyny and obsession with meat and masculinity. Val Plumwood, another major eco feminist writer, in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) studies on how ecofeminism and other theories including radical environmentalism are interconnected.

By the late 1980s, ecofeminism had initiated to branch out into two distinct schools of thought such as radical ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism. The radical ecofeminists deal with the dominant patriarchal society which degrades nature and women. Cultural ecofeminists encourage an association with women and the environment. It finds that women have a more intimate relationship with nature because of their gender roles. Women act as family nurturers and providers of food. Cultural ecofeminists believe that such relations allow women to be gentler to the sanctity and degradation of the environment. Cultural ecofeminism has roots in nature-based religions, goddess and nature worship as a spirituality of nature.

"Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, but nor can it be independent of it" (177). Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* is a climate change fiction which also connects culture and ecofeminism in a lucid way. In *Flight Behaviour*, the town, Tennessee idealizes the cultural values and meanings which are structured in their living. While existing in such an atmosphere, the protagonist of the novel, Dellarobia is not allowed to neglect her circumstances. Her major conflict in the novel is to change the attitude of the people in Tennessee regarding the Monarch butterflies. In cultural studies, race, gender and disability do not occur as the critics believe that they are concepts or beliefs. "From the cultural studies perspective, things like race, gender or disability do not really exist but are instead concepts or beliefs that people have created in order to organize their cultures or societies" (n. p). When analyses Dellarobia's condition, she is not allowed to reject her cultural concepts and within that boundary she is succeeded in changing the community.

The nineteenth century feminism points out that, "Very few women work for a living, unless they are driven to it by dire necessity" (117). Though, *Flight Behaviour* is a work of fiction in the twenty first century, the circumstances of women are same in the beginning of feminism. Dellarobia, on the other hand, is a self-determined woman, who gives much importance to education and social ethics, especially to environmentalism. She lives in an unhappy married life, where she is not allowed to go behind her dreams. Through the protagonist, Kingsolver narrates the issues of many women all over the world.

Being a part of patriarchal society, in the beginning, Dellarobia is not permissible to break her rules, still she leaves her cultural beliefs to be with her lover. Her encounter with the fierce and wondrous burning forest forced her to appreciate the implication of divine intervention. "Her fly away thoughts had not blurred out the inconveniences altogether" (9). Its mysteriousness is basically due to her self-respect. She wishes to make a good impression on the lover that she is accepting God's decision to follow her cultural background. In reality, the forest consists of millions of bright orange Monarch butterflies due to the after effect of

global warming. Dellarobia is confined in an unsuitable family life to her and once she decides to abandon everything including her cultural values. She realizes that, it is not possible to neglect the morals she has followed once by admitting the sight of butterflies as God's warning to her. "Burning coals of fire went up and down among the living creatures" (19). Dellarobia finds herself bounded with the cultural dogma of the place. Dellarobia descends the mountain, filled with a new self-confidence, like Moses after receiving the Ten Commandments.

A small shift between cloud and sun altered the day-light and the whole landscape intensified, brightening before her eyes. The forest blazed with its own internal flame. "Jesus", she said, not calling for help, she and Jesus weren't that close, but putting her voice in the world because nothing else present made sense. The sun slipped out by another degree, passing its warmth across the land, and the mountain seemed to explode with light. (19)

Ecocriticism connects female emotions with nature and it becomes ecofeminism and Flight Behaviour narrates the growth of Dellarobia. In both cases, the novel deals with environment and human beings. When she realizes the actual situation from Ovid Byron, her concerns are changed. In the Appalachian Mountains butterflies face extinction and they are exposed to sub-zero temperatures. Global warming creates climate related factors responsible for disrupting the butterflies' normal migration patterns. Dellarobia places herself with the Monarch butterflies and their escape from one place to another. She realizes there is no gender barrier in saving the planet. Ecofeminism uses the basic feminist tenets of equality between genders. Cultural ecofeminists suggest that: "Women have a more intimate relationship with nature because of their gender roles and their biology" (n. p). Dellarobia once had dreams of freedom and fulfilment. After getting pregnant at her seventeen, she put those dreams away and settled into a life of quiet despair with two little children and later she confronts her choices and decides whether to remain in her suffocating life or grab at the new truth of existence. Like the shift of the butterflies, at the beginning, she finds temporary release in flirtations with other men. The sight of butterflies makes her believed about the outer world and her inner self. Her cultural beliefs are collided from different backgrounds and opposing viewpoints of people around her. With the help of Byron, Dellarobia slowly get into the world of knowledge.

She was unsure now whether he'd dismissed her from microscope. Ovid was fiddling with rectangular glass slides in a slotted box. He fitted the slide under the microscope's flat metal elbows, clamping it to the platform. 'This is interesting. Have a look', he said. (335)

Cultural ecofeminism has roots in nature-based religions, goddess and nature worship as a way of redeeming both the spirituality of nature. Women have that innate role of spirituality. In Dellarobia's situation, she is nor or less religious but possesses a romanticization with nature. The cultural ecofeminists state that, "The nature-based worship groups also differed with regard to the romanticization of nature and roles that various practices" (n. p). Kingsolver portrays Dellarobia to unravel the ecological issues of Southern Appalachia. As the novel flows through Dellarobia, it carries a feminine outlook to the environmental troubles. The novel picturises the real-life environmental exploitation and maintains a hopeful

transformation through activists such as Ovid Byron and Dellarobia. Other than the protagonist, other female characters including her mother-in-law, Hester are surprisingly involving in the global issue. The environmentally conscious women take ecofeminism as a theoretical tool, though they are bounded with familial responsibilities. It is portrayed through their conversations.

The women had no feeling for children's joy. She could not take the fun out of ice cream, dirt, fishing with live bait, you name it. Being around Hester tended to invoke an anguish for Cub's childhood that made Dellarobia wish she could scoop him up and get him away from there. Probably that was where all her family troubles began. (41)

The multidisciplinary nature of ecofeminist thoughts and the diverse ideas present among its proponents brings multiple strands of ecofeminism. "Ecofeminism argues that, the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are consequences of patriarchy and capitalism" (n. p). Among them, cultural ecofeminists encourage women's closeness towards nature as it upholds the superior status of women. They support the essential feminine qualities like nurturing and caring nature. Dellarobia is typical in the concept of cultural ecofeminism that, she loves her environment and the creatures in it and dedicates her life to save them from extinction. She remains a spiritual relation with nature and closeness is inherent in her.

One of God's creatures of this world, meeting its End of Days, she said after a quiet minute. Not words of science, she knew that, but it was a truth she could feel. The forest flame that had lifted her despair, the migratory pulse that had rocked in the arms of a continent for all the time: these fell like stones in her heart. (316)

Kingsolver, in her novels, conveys her ecological consciousness. She writes: "I don't consider a novel to be purely recreational vehicle. I think it is an outlet for my despair, my delight, my considered opinions and all the things that strike me" (7). The narrates issues in the novel are actually the issues disturbed the author. Conversation about global warming between Ovid and Dellarobia are the seriousness of the effect carried out by the author. In the familial back ground, Dellarobia is less noticed by her husband and others. It is also recognized by Ovid in certain occasions. "She knew who he meant. Ovid Byron. 'No, I haven't. it's too weird. It's like the butterflies came here, and we might be next'" (235). So that she is failed to stop her father-in-law from logging contract and spraying DDT. She is restricted to raise her voice as she is a woman. Novel discusses the boundaries of women in the patriarchal community. Toril Moi, in her book, *Sexual Politics* writes:

There is a conditioning and socialization underpin a crucial set of distinctions- that between feminist, female and feminine. The first is apolitical position, the second is a matter of biology and the third is a set of culturally defined characters. Particularly in the distinction between the second and third of these lies much of the force of feminism. (117)

In *Flight Behaviour*, Dellarobia is culturally defined by others and breaks the boundaries in order to save the butterflies. For that she has to act against the cultural beliefs of

the villagers. Her unrevealed feminism is resulted in her ecofeminism through different experiences she got from interviewers. She recollects the women environmentalists' trust: "Dellarobia thought for a moment, Knit the Earth or Women Knit the Earth. Something like that" (414). A culture bounded ecofeminism can be seen in the growth of Dellarobia. The novel carries the growth and self-realization of the protagonist. From a heavily narrowed social and cultural outfit, Dellarobia has emerged as a woman who stands for the betterment of the environment. She has faced different opinions and conclusions from the media as well as the villagers.

Feminism and ecofeminism are not biased on the social and political culture of the literary works. Each character is differently created according to their cultural contextuality. critics admits that, "If femininity is socially constructed, then it must follow that it differs from one culture to another, so that such overarching generalizations about it are impossible" (123). The novel *Flight Behaviour*, hopefully presents the female characters as an inspiration for the future generation. When, Dellarobia represents a woman of modern era who forced to be in an unhappy married life, her mother-in-law Hester represents the old generation who are accustomed with their suffering. Yet, there are similarities between them. Their cultural backgrounds are identical, though they belong to different generations and having different opinion.

Hester thinks God is keeping the winter mild to protect the butterflies. There is a faction at church that thinks that too. The butterflies knew God was looking after things here, and that's why they came to Feather town. 'Your mother-in-law is a hot mess', Dovey said. Dellarobia could not dispute the diagnosis. (415)

Vandana Shiva in her book *Ecofeminism* writes: "Anthropologists have commented on the marked nature of woman's body by caste, religious belief and socio-cultural values" (3). Hester's concept is different from her daughter-in-law. She likes to believe everything in the name of God and wants to accept the sight of the butterflies as a miracle. Hester is the only supportive member of the family for saving the butterflies from applying pesticides and DDT. Hester regulates herself with everything included Ovid's camp in their field. She also makes monetary benefit out of it by seeking attention from tourists. The poverty of Tennessee people is shown through this act of Hester. Though she believes that the butterflies are God's presence, she is not bothered about using them for money. When Dellarobia reveals that she earns money from the lab work, Hester seems startled because self-earning by women is not much practiced in their society. Situation has changed when they know the fact that Bear has signed an agreement with a logger for cutting down the trees. Hester cannot do anything against it and requests daughter in law not to stay against him. It shows the custom of obeying patriarchy in the society. Hester is not free to break her cultural chain rather, Dellarobia finally overcomes the dogmas.

Barbara Kingsolver provides an inter connection with science, religion and culture astonishingly. Every character in *Flight Behaviour*, moves their thoughts from religious fundamentalism to environmentalism. Dellarobia's environmental consciousness makes her to save the butterflies to an extent by shipping them to a warmer place. She says: "That is a

concern of consciousness, not of biology. Science does not tell us what we do. It only tells us what is” (442). Like in the present situation, the rating-conscious media frames the phenomenon to suit their own interests. A local newspaper presents Dellarobia as “Our Lady of the Butterflies” (77). An interview with Dellarobia goes viral in which she says that the sight of butterflies helps her to forget the suicide tendency. Thus, the butterflies hail as a life saver and she redefines herself with the raise of butterflies.

A self-liberation can happen on the earth. Ecofeminism postulates that, the liberation of women is possible through the liberation of nature. *Flight Behaviour* explores environmental challenges and the interrelationship between women and nature. Her husband Cub and her mother-in-law interpret her vision as a sign of divine grace, and Dellarobia is initially forced to believe it herself. Later it becomes a heavy task for her to rethink and make others to believe the truth. Like cultural feminists comments the novel is centred on, “Both intimate and enormous, centred on one woman, on one family, one small town no one has ever heard of” (n. p). Dellarobia’s consciousness is stumbled into a life-altering journey of consciousness in order to be the care taker of the butterflies. Her attitude towards women’s role has changed and started to respect them.

“W-O-M-Y-N”, Dovey added. “That is who is knitting the Earth”.

“Well, they are from England”, Dellarobia said.

“May be spelling is not their long suit. These girls are king of rough. But they are good knitters, you should see their little monarch butterflies. Are there photos?” (415)

Kingsolver’s feminism is different from the previous dogma of feminism put forward by male writers. Thus, the contemporary feminist writers ask the fundamental issue that, “whether or not there exists a form of language which is inherently feminine” (121). *Flight Behaviour* negotiates this question as it is an Eco feminine work written by an environmentalist come feminist Barbara Kingsolver. Dellarobia’s passion towards education and discovering new finding about butterflies are revealed after the entry of Ovid Byron. When they start to work together, she identifies her true femineity. She has developed a new like towards Ovid and at one point she decides to leave the Turnbow family farm to get a better life to her as well as to her children. The verdicts of Dellarobia, though they are influenced by Ovid, are finally her own words. They are not “a man’s sentence” (121). When she succeeds to educate the villagers, she also gets educated and identifies herself with the butterflies. When a sudden storm nearly destroys the colonies, the villagers hope that there is enough life emerges in the end. Thus, Dellarobia also hopes to do the same by separating from her husband with her children, so that she can start a new life.

Flight Behaviour is a novel about the migration of Dellarobia along with the butterflies to the world of self-realization. According to Meenakshi Thapan, “All humans are embodied creatures and not mere Cartesian minds that happen to be located in some biological matter. It follows that female embodiment is dissimilar to male embodiment for social everyday life” (1). Dellarobia is similar to the embodiment of the Monarch butterflies, in her past and present. A much reclusive and reluctant Dellarobia is portrayed in the last chapter as “A perfect female”

(566) when she takes part in the delivery of an ewe. When she saved the new-born lamb, she proves herself as a care taker of nature and becomes capable of accepting the social challenges. She becomes a complete female who possess kindness and empathy as she utters: “Breathe, damn it, damn it, come on, breathe!” (574).

She rolled onto her knees and clambered back up the slick path she had just compressed, a perfect sledding route. Without ever fully gaining her feet she made it back to the puddle of lamb, swearing at the mother that stood blandly chewing now, some distance away from this thing that had definitely not happened to her. (572)

The changes in Dellarobia are the result of her eco-social awareness and her encounter with the reality of anthropogenic impacts of human negligence on nature. She expresses her change to her friend Dovey as, “I was blind, but now I see” (45). Kingsolver proves that, the creation of a materialistic culture has divided humanity and nature. Nature is like any other life and also nature is the life partner. The novel, through Dellarobia, suggests to bring the social and cultural changes, which help for the corresponding change in the attitude of every one towards environment. The novel concludes with the positive note on the rebirth of hope and prosperity. “Above the lake of the world, flanked by white mountains, they flew out to a new birth” (442).

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