

**Impacts of Climate Change on Rural Communities: An Ecocritical Reading of
Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior***

Dr. A.K. Mohamed Ali

Associate Professor, Postgraduate & Research Department of English, The New College,
Chennai

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Abstract:

This paper examines Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* to trace the impact of climate change on rural communities as presented in the novel. It analyses how environmental and socio-economic factors affect rural communities that depend only on agriculture. Rather than portraying climate change as a scientific phenomenon, the writer shows its consequences through declining agricultural productivity, ecological instability, indebtedness, food insecurity, and the gradual erosion of rural livelihoods. This article applies a unified ecocriticism framework to analyse how climate change impacts rural communities throughout the novel. This study uses i) Lawrence Buell's environmental criticism, ii) Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocriticism, and iii) Rob Nixon's concept of Slow Violence. Through close textual analysis, this study argues that the writer depicts environmental degradation as indivisible from economic inequality. This indicates that marginalised farming communities face serious challenges and bear the burden of ecological disruption. Through her work, she exposes how politics is entangled with the environment and how it remains powerful in dividing along class lines, making sustainable practices inaccessible to economically underprivileged families. By integrating ecological consequences with three layers: debt, poverty and food insecurity, she extends and focuses on modern climate fiction beyond environmental protagonism to become an effective review of social injustice. This paper concludes that she positions climate change as a serious issue of environmental justice, establishing that ecological crises are akin to crises of identity, livelihoods, and survival for endangered rural communities.

Keywords: Climate Change, Rural communities, Environmental Justice, Slow Violence, Survival, Ecocriticism

Introduction

Climate change is one of the most important global challenges of this century, affecting human societies with unprecedented intensity, devastating ecosystems, and deeply impacting economies. Other issues, such as irregular rainfall, rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, cloudbursts in some places, flooding, and complete biodiversity loss, increasingly threaten agricultural production for rural communities whose livelihoods depend directly on ecological stability and natural resources. Much scientific research documents these environmental issues in general and in particular. However, these contributions are effective and impact readers, who gain insights into climate change by connecting with individual characters and the communal experiences represented in contemporary climate fiction. So, climate fiction occupies a vital position within the environmental humanities, transforming scientific realities into emotionally resonant narratives. These books awaken human consciousness to understand and address ecological disruption. Barbara Kingsolver occupies an important place in contemporary American Fiction for integrating ecological science with social criticism in compelling narratives. In 2012, she published *Flight Behavior*, which explores the relationship between climate change and its impact on poverty in rural communities through the character Dellarobia Turnbow, who lives in an Appalachian community in the Tennessee Mountains.

Changing climatic conditions and a flooded landscape suggest an environmental imbalance that affects agricultural production. As a result, families' economic well-being suffers because their survival depends on the land. The novel argues that climate change is a global phenomenon that affects every community in close contact with nature. She depicts communities facing real-life challenges because of climate change, unpredictable seasons, and failed harvests. The consequences include debt and growing economic insecurity. In general, climate fiction focuses on scientific explanation. However, this novel focuses on the problems rural families and communities face when they depend on agriculture and are easily vulnerable to ecological change. The writer presents the natural phenomena through scenes in the novel. Often, readers see fluctuations in rainfall, humidity, and temperature, and the community fails to preserve biodiversity because these forces are beyond its control. They ultimately suffer financially from environmental degradation. This pushes them further into poverty. To examine these interconnected issues, Ecocriticism can be taken as the theoretical framework. Glotfelty and Fromm argue that since its emergence in the 1990s, it has expanded from the study of nature's literary agency to include ecological ethics, climate change, environmental justice, and the relationship between environmental degradation and social inequality. Recent studies in the ecocritical field highlight that crises of environmental disasters disproportionately affect marginalised communities. Sathikulameen et al. argue that ecology is inseparable from probing class, labour, and economic justice. These catastrophes often impose an extreme burden on vulnerable and marginalised communities whose livelihoods depend entirely on their local environments. Through her work, she reflects this broader vision by depicting climate change as both a socio-economic and an ecological crisis.

Rob Nixon argues that environmental destruction generally occurs in a moderate, invisible manner. It develops cumulative patterns of suffering that remain politically overlooked. Climate change constitutes such violence because its effects unfold incrementally through declining agricultural productivity, food insecurity, indebtedness, and ecological degradation. This article argues that climate change is a universal problem within the field of environmental justice. Still, its effects are not equally felt by all, and the impact is uneven. In the present scenario, richer countries can tackle it through technology. They manage it financially by going for insurance. The impact is less than in other rural communities that fail to plan or adopt more diversified income sources to adapt to climate change. The farmers in the novel, from poor rural communities, lack the same resources or strategies as the novel frequently illustrates. Ecological systems significantly impact their livelihoods because they depend on them and are closely exposed to them. Thus, this article posits a strong argument that this novel establishes that climate change is the principal cause of the main characters' poverty in the rural Appalachian community and how they pass through these challenges: i) agricultural insecurity, ii) ecological degradation, iii) household economic insecurity, and iv) social inequality. Through this novel, the writer does not portray environmental issues as natural and unavoidable; instead, she reveals how human-constructed causes of the issues and how those issues expose and increase or affect already existing economic inequalities to emphasise the need for a more sustainable environmental policy to tackle them immediately in the context of increased social justice.

Research Questions

The following research questions analyse the impact of climate change on poverty among rural communities. Firstly, how does Barbara Kingsolver represent climate change as a cause of poverty among rural communities, and how does it transform agricultural livelihoods and affect household economies? Secondly, how does the novel reveal the unequal social distribution of climate vulnerability? Finally, how does an ecocritical reading help us understand the relationship between environmental degradation and economic inequality? Through close textual analysis, this paper shows how environmental issues have affected rural livelihoods by altering the economic foundations of rural life and threatening food security, employment, and community resilience. This paper will contribute to contemporary environmental humanities by showing that environmental justice is an important factor today and cannot be achieved without simultaneously addressing poverty and economic inequality among rural communities.

Literature Review

In contemporary climate fiction, Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* has drawn the attention of several scholars for its interdisciplinary engagement with rural American ecology, environmental ethics, and climate science. Critics in that field agree that this novel attracts scholars to research-focused areas, not only to recognise climate change as a conceptual scientific phenomenon but also as a lived experience affecting ordinary communities, as the novel presents it. Subhashini et al. examine rural communities through

the lens of marginalisation, particularly by showing how environmental crises disproportionately affect communities with limited social and economic power. Noormohamed states that the novel challenges the conventional human–nature dichotomy by presenting climate change not merely as an environmental problem but as a crisis that transforms the social, economic, and cultural life of a rural community. Noormohamed and Sathikulameen argue that environmental degradation affects ecosystems alone; it also disrupts the social and economic structures of communities that depend on those environments.

However, some existing work has examined the writer’s ecological vision; by contrast, little research has systematically explored the connection between climate change and poverty among rural communities through an ecocritical framework. Glotfelty and Fromm argue that past research in ecocriticism focused mainly on literary representations of nature and discussed only the human-environment relationship. Later, Buell and Garrard demonstrate that ecocriticism expanded to explore environmental justice, climate change, and sustainability studies, which focus on the social consequences of environmental degradation. Recent studies in Ecocriticism show that environmental crises cannot be studied independently of race, labour, gender, class, and other economic inequality. Building on these broader viewpoints, this novel can be examined through a Framework that focuses on how ecological disturbance troubles communities living in rural poverty.

According to Lawrence Buell, environmental criticism should focus not only on nature but also on studying the material realities of the environmental crisis and its consequences. He argues that transformations occur because ecological conditions can reshape individuals' lives and change cultural values. This novel clearly shows how climate change disrupts individuals' economic lives. Garrard advises that present scholars in Ecocriticism must focus on analysing environmental risks and their implications. Through her work, she focuses on scenes depicting inconsistent rainfall, missing seasons, extreme temperature shifts, agricultural failures, and disrupted migration patterns of insects, animals, and humans. The instability of nature is linked to the instability of the forming economy. Rob Nixon’s concept of Slow Violence argues that environmental damage unfolds slowly and becomes apparent only over time. Put simply, climate change causes gradual deterioration rather than sudden disruptions to the status quo. This is particularly evident in the gradual imposition of new conditions on farming households and the loss of natural resources that previously formed the backbone of their economy. The effects of climate change are far-reaching, causing food shortages, biodiversity loss, poverty, and other issues. In many ways, the concept is directly applicable to *Flight Behavior*, as the problems affecting Dellarobia’s community unfold gradually. This is evident in the slow degradation of the local ecology, which leads to the progressive impoverishment of the town’s residents.

A recent line of criticism focuses on climate fiction's capacity to represent the human cost of global warming. Some researchers argue that the genre helps people empathise with the impacts of climate change by humanising it. Other critics have explored climate change fiction's capacity to depict the effects of global warming on familiar settings and objects. Indeed, *Flight Behavior* is all about bringing the impersonal forces of nature to bear on the intimate setting of a family farm. The novel examines how climate change feeds into shifts in relationships, employment prospects, and even identity. At the same time, it should be noted that critics have drawn attention to the fact that Kingsolver's fiction breaks down the dichotomy between the scientific and the vernacular. Scientific discourse is consistently interwoven with the protagonist's mother tongue, creating a sense of wholeness largely absent in other climate change novels.

Nevertheless, most research on *Flight Behavior* focuses on ecology and environmental philosophy, complemented by an analysis of the author's attitude toward science. The ways climate change contributes to poverty and social inequality are rarely discussed in detail. This study therefore contributes to Kingsolver scholarship by positioning agricultural livelihoods and economic precarity as pivotal points of ecocritical analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This paper applies an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines ecocriticism, Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence*, and environmental justice theory. In this study, these approaches elucidate the relationship between ecological disruption and poverty among rural communities in *Flight Behavior*. Ecocriticism analyses the mutual relationship between literature and the natural environment. Cheryll Glotfelty studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment, foregrounding how literary texts both reflect and shape ecological consciousness. Rather than passive scenery, nature in this book is a vital element shaping human life, culture, and politics.

In this regard, ecocriticism goes beyond studying the environment's impact on people. According to Lawrence Buell, environmental criticism should also address ecological catastrophe and its impact on society. In other words, economic and political dimensions are essential parts of any ecocritical issue. As a result, themes such as environmental justice and sustainability receive increasing attention. Garrard's point is also relevant, as he suggests that environmental literature deals with the instability of the relationship between humans and nature. Perhaps climate change, a concept inseparable from human life, is the central threat to the planet's sustainability. It can disrupt vital areas of human life, such as food production and rural life. These ideas can help us better understand *Flight Behavior*: its portrayal of the disruption of the established economic order is deeply intertwined with the environmental issues facing the protagonist. To understand the novel's representation of climate change, Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* offers a particularly valuable framework. He explains *Slow Violence* as something that happens gradually and is largely invisible as it occurs, and climate change is a perfect

example. Farmers do not understand how slowly they are affected, and they see problems slowly cropping up: poor agricultural seasons, lack of rain, lower yields, droughts, flooding in their areas, and debts piling up that they cannot repay. They cannot understand what is happening to them. Dellarobia's family in the novel also faces these problems not immediately, but through gradual exposure to climate change and its effects. Their poverty is slowly inflicted on them over several years. The concept of Slow Violence helps explain how climate change most threatens poor farmers, how they face these problems, and how it harms them slowly.

Research on environmental justice reveals that the impacts of ecological damage are unevenly distributed across societies. Different groups of people live in different societies. In particular, marginalised groups face more environmental harm than others. The novel spotlights Dellarobia's financial status and their survival in the context of environmental conservation. It shows how each individual's ecological responsibility can be tied to their personal living situation. The environmental justice literature shows that ecological crises involve both society and the environment, suggesting that environmentally responsible choices remain inaccessible to households already facing economic hardship. Thus, many scholars have explored this novel as both climate fiction and an environmental allegory. However, only a few studies have systematically investigated the relationship between climate change and its impact on rural poverty through ecocritical approaches. In particular, the literature has not adequately discussed rural communities' material possessions for livelihoods, often overlooking the environmental mechanisms through which climate instability intensifies financial hardship.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative textual analysis through a close reading of the novel to examine how climate change catalyses poverty among rural communities. This study also examines how ecological transformations directly shape the socio-economic conditions of farming communities in Appalachia in Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*. Secondary sources for this study include Ecocriticism, environmental justice and climate fiction. The theoretical perspectives applied in this study provide a detailed analysis of the interdisciplinary interaction between ecological destruction and rural livelihoods.

Analysis and Discussion

This section analyses how climate change affects rural communities by drawing on selected quotations from the novel, focusing on indebtedness, land loss, food insecurity, and the gradual erosion of rural livelihoods. Some incidents in the novel portray minor climate fluctuations that affect rural livelihoods and force them to confront ecological instability. The writer presents the relationship between climate and rural income as follows: "a lot of income turned on a few points of humidity" (Kingsolver 28). From an Eco-critical standpoint, this quotation demonstrates the need for interdependence between humans and the natural environment. According to Lawrence Buell, human societies remain embedded in ecological systems despite modern technological advancement. Rob Nixon's *Slow*

Violence further illuminates this theme. Climate change rarely destroys livelihoods instantaneously; instead, incremental ecological changes gradually undermine economic stability. The failed harvests and the intensification of rural poverty are evident in the following:

This time of year the mow should have been packed like a suitcase, filled side to side and top to bottom, but the cavernous loft was more than half empty. They'd lost the late-summer cutting because three consecutive rainless days were needed for cutting, raking, and baling a hay crop. (Kingsolver 44)

The passage clearly shows that agricultural production depends entirely on ecological and climate conditions. Garrard states that climate change fundamentally challenges humanity's assumptions regarding environmental predictability. It therefore produces cumulative rather than isolated economic consequences. Elsewhere, the writer shows how climate-induced debt troubles them and threatens their economic security and survival. The following lines vouch for it:

The taxes went up, and he's got a balloon on his equipment loan... He's thinking we'll have to buy hay out of Missouri this winter, after we lost so much of ours. (Kingsolver 45)

The writer shows how ecological and economic crises are interconnected. Fewer harvests reduce household income, and they also face problems from local ecological failure. They depend on distant market fluctuations, transportation costs, and broader economic uncertainties. The collapse of ecological predictability is exposed in the following lines: "Summer's heat had never really arrived, nor the cold in its turn... The world of sensible seasons had come undone" (Kingsolver 57). The passage reflects a central concern of contemporary climate fiction and evokes ecological predictability and its specific sense of crumbling. Now, climate change no longer appears as isolated weather anomalies but as the collapse of environmental order itself. The lines evoke generations of accumulated agricultural knowledge built on predictable climatic rhythms, and Lawrence Buell connects this by noting humanity's dependence on ecological continuity. For a matter of survival and poverty-driven ecological destruction at the cost of nature: "Whatever's too little to cut up for lumber, he said they can grind into paper.... They'll make it look like a war zone... Nothing but mud and splinters" (Kingsolver 48).

The phrase "war zone" is used by the writer as imagery to present it as an act of environmental devastation comparable to armed conflict that accelerates the very environmental instability that causes rural poverty. Lawrence Buell argues that environmental writings often expose the illusion that nature exists solely for human exploitation. Deforestation clearly signals that catastrophe unfolds slowly. However, its consequences are very powerful, and effects accumulate gradually in the following ways:

soil erosion, declining biodiversity, altered rainfall patterns, missed seasons, and habitat loss. The writer brings forth how climate affects household food insecurity in the following lines: “Hester's flower beds had melted under the summer's endless rain, and so had the garden. They'd finished tomato canning almost before they started” (Kingsolver 214). These lines illustrate how abnormal rainfall in landscapes destroys both ornamental and productive atmospheres. Household self-sufficiency collapses when a vegetable garden is destroyed. This is ecocritical because the garden symbolises the relationship between domestic life and ecological stability. As a result, environmental politics cannot be ignored. The lines from the text confirm rural identity:

Team camo, we get the right to bear arms, John Deere, the canning jars, tough love, and taking care of our own. The other side... they get recycling, population control, lattes, and as many second chances as anybody wants. (Kingsolver 342)

The writer illustrates the cultural polarisation surrounding environmental politics. Rural identity becomes associated with agriculture, self-reliance, and economic survival, whereas environmentalism appears linked to urban privilege, consumer choice, and political liberalism. From the rural community's perspective, environmental discourse has long been detached from economic realities. The urban environmentalists may underestimate the financial constraints that limit sustainable choices.

Garrard affirms the need for environmental criticism that should acknowledge the social contexts in which people make ecological decisions. To portray sustainability as economic privilege, the writer gives the following lines: “Fly less... Technically that is impossible... if it involves buying something, check me in the bad-girl column” (Kingsolver 349). To expose a class-based assumption, the author uses the following phrase to encapsulate the contradiction between environmental ideas and economic realities: “if it involves buying something” (Kingsolver 349). The process of the movement can be viewed through the concept of Slow violence because climate change disproportionately affects poor communities while also limiting their capacity to participate in proposed solutions. The writer argues that ecological sustainability and economic justice are fundamentally interconnected. She depicts ecological collapse and environmental crises in the following way: “This is a biological system falling apart along its seams... We have arrived at the point of an audible roar” (Kingsolver 387). The lines represent the novel's ecological endpoint; the metaphor “falling apart along its seams” (387) evokes a carefully woven fabric gradually unravelling. Kingsolver thus presents climate change as a systemic crisis affecting both ecological integrity and human survival. In another question from the novel: “How will you feel ten years from now, when a serious lot of the farms in the world don't have a damn rainy season anymore? And you were party to that?” (Kingsolver 390).

This question turns climate change into an ethical challenge for humanity as a whole. The lines on climate change, food security, and the future of rural livelihoods remind readers

that technological advancement cannot fully replace ecological stability. The phrase, "you were party to that," introduces the concept of environmental responsibility. The novel encourages readers to act decisively through collective reflection on consumption patterns, environmental policy, and ecological ethics. The writer argues that responsibility remains unevenly distributed because rural farming communities contribute relatively little to global carbon emissions yet experience disproportionately severe consequences. Therefore, climate change could disrupt existing social norms and alter migration patterns and settlement dynamics. She argues that protecting ecological systems is indivisible from protecting human livelihoods. Sustainable agriculture through climate action is vital to future food security for all communities who live close to nature.

Conclusion

Thus, this paper presents climate change as a crisis that extends beyond environmental degradation to affect agricultural productivity, drive rural poverty through increased indebtedness, and heighten social inequality. The writer confirms that environmental crises such as extreme temperatures, erratic rainfall, and seasonal unpredictability increasingly threaten their agricultural livelihoods. These crises reduce productivity across sectors and intensify financial instability, forcing them to confront challenges that weaken their economies. Other factors, including declining harvests and reduced productivity, increase debt, weaken household resilience, and threaten long-term food security, illustrating the close relationship between ecological and economic systems. Through her work, she also challenges naive assumptions about environmental responsibility. Desai notes that people need a sustainable living environment, and that economically disadvantaged households also require financial resources during disasters. Scenes of monarch butterflies' displacement represent the collapse of global ecosystems, while Appalachian farmers' shared stories reveal the human consequences of environmental instability. Therefore, the writer binds literature with ecological content to motivate readers to recognise climate change as an issue about justice, ethics, and survival. Restoring ecological balance is essential for rural communities to live peacefully in the future. Agricultural sustainability, environmental stewardship, food security, and economic resilience always remain inseparable. Climate change and its influence therefore emerge not simply as an environmental challenge but as one of the defining humanitarian issues of the twenty-first century, which should be addressed urgently with policy-changing outcomes.

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