

Feminism and environmentalism: an intersection



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

It is absolutely no coincidence whatsoever that Mother Earth is portrayed as a woman rather than a man. After all, a large part of the human existence has been spent taking advantage of Mother Earth's resources. In the same way, many of history's so-called greatest men have seen it fit to take advantage of women's resources. This is not to say that all men take advantage of women, but rather to imply that over the course of human existence, the male gender has gained a reputation for disrespecting women. Women are told to travel in packs and not wear certain clothing in fear of men disrespecting their bodies. It follows, then, that those who have a habit of being disrespectful towards women, or other human beings in general, would be innately predisposed to act in the same disrespectful manner towards Mother Earth. These two paradigms are fleshed out in two novels in particular, *State of Fear* by Michael Crichton and *Flight Behavior* by Barbara Kingsolver. The different levels of courtesy that Crichton and Kingsolver display for women in their respective novels correlate with their differing opinions on climate change in that Kingsolver shows a great respect for women and the planet in her novel while Crichton does the opposite.

Lin Nelson outlines this thesis well in, "The Place of Women in Polluted Places." For instance, Nelson writes that she wants to, "observe the ways in which women continue to fight the forces of environmental destruction and in doing so challenge the frameworks for destruction." Nelson later reveals that these "frameworks for destruction" often manifest themselves in the form of the patriarchy. Women and the environment are similarly damaged, as evidenced by the fact that Nelson writes, "in addition to the social abuse women suffer under patriarchy ... there are very real biological hazards to be

considered” (Nelson 176). Clearly, Nelson agrees with Barbara Kingsolver’s idea that women and the environment are inextricably linked, not only through their femininity but also through the way that the patriarchy oppresses them both. In Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, women are portrayed with respect by being characterized as strong, independent leaders, and by consistently being placed at the forefront of the plot. Even the secondary characters in the story are strong women for the main characters to lean on. For instance, the protagonist, Dellarobia, describes her best friend by saying, “ Dovey worked behind the meat counter ... a man’s world if there ever was one ... Dovey held her own ... Be sweet and carry a sharp knife, was her motto” (Kingsolver 31). The fact that Kingsolver writes her protagonist’s best friend as someone who holds “ her own,” works in “ a man’s world,” and carries “ a sharp knife” (even metaphorically) implies that the author has enough respect for women to elevate them to a man’s level. Kingsolver also manages to elucidate her respect for women in her novel through Dellarobia’s unfeminine habits and actions.

For example, at one point in *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver writes that Dellarobia, “ was ready to ... run towards the sight of her dear children, and, more importantly, her cigarettes” (Kingsolver 149). This description of Dellarobia is unfeminine in nature because Dellarobia acts unmotherly in that she longs for “ her cigarettes” (which are an unfeminine object in this day and age to begin with) more than she does “ her children.” Although some people may assume that being unmotherly and having a bad habit of smoking cigarettes is unattractive or even repulsive, readers still manage to connect with Dellarobia. Her unfeminine characteristics are not only a way

that Kingsolver uses to put Dellarobia on the same level as men, but they are also relatable to a lot of readers. Another example of a time that Dellarobia acts particularly unfeminine is when, at the start of the novel, she makes an attempt to commit adultery. While climbing a hill, she thought to herself, “no husband worth having is going to forgive adultery ... and she still felt pulled up this incline” (Kingsolver 2). Committing “adultery” is much more commonly associated with men than women. After all, how many romantic comedies or dramas have you seen where an innocent Bridget Jones-esque woman is blindsided and cheated on by her love interest? There are certainly an abundance of man-hating narratives out there available for viewing. So the fact that Kingsolver has her female protagonist be the one tempted to commit adultery against her simple-minded husband is borderline revolutionary in terms of gender roles. Although it may seem backwards at first, Kingsolver shows women a lot of respect in her novel by having them perform actions such as adultery, working behind a meat counter, and smoking cigarettes, because she elevates them to the higher level at which men are so often viewed by having her female characters perform unfeminine actions.

In the same way that Kingsolver’s novel respects women, it also shows a great respect for nature and Mother Earth herself. Kingsolver uses a preservationist approach to her environmentalism in this novel. This means that she exhibits a passionate desire to preserve the Earth for its intrinsic value, rather than a conservationist who would like to conserve the Earth’s resources for our own human uses, such as having wood to build houses with or electricity to power those houses with. For instance, when

Dellarobia tries to explain to the scientists and Ovid what the monarch butterflies meant to her town and church community, she tells them gently, “ this has been a meaningful thing ... it helps them respect the earth” (Kingsolver 152). In this quotation, Dellarobia elucidates that the butterflies are a “ meaningful thing” and helps her church community, or “ them,” respect the Earth because they now find it more beautiful and worth preserving. This statement makes it that much easier for readers to understand why such a beautiful facet of the natural world would be worth preserving. Kingsolver even interlaces preservationism and Christianity when she writes that, “ together they saw light streaming through glowing wings. Like embers ... the warmth they had craved so long ... ‘ Lord almighty, the girl is receiving grace’ said Hester” (Kingsolver 57). The word “ they” in this passage stands for Dellarobia and her family. “ The girl” is Dellarobia, and Hester believes that she is “ receiving grace” because she is physically reacting to how beautiful and meaningful the butterflies are. “ The warmth” that Dellarobia “ had craved so long” is a fascinating metaphor for something more, something bigger in the world that protects her. The butterflies up on the hill of the Turnbow property show Dellarobia that there is no reason for something in the world to be that beautiful and meaningful to her on a purely biological basis, which implies the existence of a God figure or higher power. With all of this in mind, we can see that it makes perfect sense for Dellarobia to be passionate about preserving the butterflies. After all, these majestic creatures really made her believe that there is something greater than herself in life, something that gave her “ warmth,” comfort, and safety. Kingsolver shows an equal respect for the Earth and the women in her novel through her characters.

Michael Crichton, on the other hand, has a severe deficiency in his vitamin R (respect). He exhibits this in many scenes in the book, but in a few scenes in particular, his lack of respect for women appears especially evident. For instance, when the male Kenner and Sarah are stuck in a dangerous lightening chamber and trying to find a way to save themselves, Crichton writes, “ What are we going to do?’ Sarah said, panicked. ‘ Take your clothes off” [Kenner said]” (Crichton 353). In all of the other action scenes presented in *State of Fear*, it is always the man’s job to rescue the woman, which is inherently sexist and therefore disrespectful in itself. However, in this scene, when it is finally Sarah’s time to shine and help get the crew out of a bad situation, the only way she is able to save them is by taking her “ clothes off.” In addition, Sarah was not even able to craft the rescue plan on her own. Instead, she had to have Kenner tell her to do so. This implies that Crichton did not even grant Sarah the agency over her own self of making the decision to take her clothes off. She had to be commanded to do so like a horseback rider commands his equine. Because of this is evident that Crichton exhibits a lack of respect for his female characters in *State of Fear*.

One woman in particular stands out as someone who Crichton shows extreme disrespect for, and her name is Mother Earth. Crichton shows his disrespect for the planet by making any character in his novel who shows a desire to treat the planet with the respect it deserves seem like a complete imbecile. Be it Ted Bradley, the idiot actor, or Ann Garner, the stay at home mom, Crichton always makes his characters seem less intelligent if they oppose his views on climate change. For instance, when Ann Garner and Kenner are talking on the plane and Kenner essentially asks her whether or

not she knows anything about science or the planet, Crichton has Ann respond by saying, “ I worked as a documentary film producer before I quit to raise my family ... But I am very dedicated to the environment, and I have been all my life’ she said. ‘ I read everything. I read the science section of The New York Times every Tuesday cover to cover ... I am extremely well informed” (Crichton 597). First off, Crichton downplays Ann’s intelligence and womanhood by having her “ quit to raise” her “ family.” This shows that she has not had the opportunity to be as educated as Kenner on scientific matters, which gives her less credibility in this narrative. Secondly, she says that she is “ very dedicated to the environment,” but her only education on science is what she reads in the New York Times once a week. This makes Ann a laughable character to an audience with the same climate-change denier ideals as Crichton. She has a less well educated background than Kenner, so, according to Crichton, clearly she is only “ dedicated to the environment” because she does not know any better. Casting an environmentalist character as someone uncredible and laughable is Crichton’s way of showing a tangent disrespect for the planet. Because Crichton casted his environmentalist characters as idiots, it follows that he has little respect for those who want to take care of the planet, and therefore very little respect for the planet itself.

Crichton’s and Kingsolver’s levels of respect for women correlate to their levels of respect for the planet. Kingsolver shows respect towards women in her novel by elevating them to the level that men are portrayed to be at in our contemporary society. She shows respect for the planet through a preservationist attitude and narrative. Crichton does the opposite by

showing extreme disrespect for women by objectifying them, and also by showing disrespect for the planet by painting those who respect it as uninformed and unintelligent. It truly is no coincidence that proverbial Mother Earth has been characterized as female, because it seems as though she can be disrespected and objectified in the same way as a literal woman.