

**HOME, HURRICANE, AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S  
*UNSHELTERED***

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**Abstract**

*Two things that define Barbara Kingsolver's writings are her politics and her attachment to the land. She remains sincere to these two commitments in her novel Unsheltered. Written against the backdrop of the political changes in the USA in 2016 and the visible signs of climate change, this novel is an attempt to make sense of people's self-destructive behavior. Though this novel is a very vocal indictment of everything that the result of the USA presidential election 2016 symbolizes, the meticulous portrayal of the natural world and humankind's relationship to it makes this novel a compelling environmental fiction. This paper postulates that Kingsolver presents humans', particularly Americans', obsession with big, huge, and more as a cause for today's predicaments, whether they are political or environmental. In an attempt to look for solutions, she considers occupying small places, less material things, and even being small-bodied as the means to survive this age of climate change. Although such hints toward solutions are not without failings, Kingsolver's weaving of fact and fiction, present and past, contribute to shifting focus on the urgencies engendered by the present condition of our planet.*

**Keywords:** Climate, Hurricane, Environmental, Politics, Big.

Leopold Kohr declares that "bigness" is the reason for every social distress(ix). Though he argues for the social and cultural aspects of human life, his idea is used by environmentalists such as Paul Kingsnorth to understand the dilemma of the climate age. Kingsnorth writes, "The human economy as a whole has grown so big that it has been able to change the atmospheric composition of the planet and precipitate a mass extinction event" (10). This idea of bigness may be a factor that contributes to the degradation of the natural environment, but it certainly is a factor that makes it almost impossible for creative writers to produce impactful climate fiction.

Adam Trexler tries to unknot the reasons behind it by asking, “How can a global process, spanning millennia, be made comprehensible to human imagination, with its limited sense of place and time?” Amitav Ghosh has also examined the reasons behind novelists’ inability to capture climate change in their novels. He writes:

Indeed, it could even be said that fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel. (9-10)

Barbara Kingsolver has made two direct attempts to bring climate change into realist fiction, which cannot be categorized as science fiction. Whereas her *Flight Behaviour* was a successful attempt and is celebrated as such, *Unsheltered* is unsuccessful in weaving climate change and the art of storytelling together. The characterization in this novel appears to be forced and oppressive. Nonetheless, this novel does remain a beacon of light to show the perils of making wrong political choices that will lead to irreversible damage to the environment. This novel shows that all the ideals of unlimited economic growth followed by people in the 80s and 90s have resulted in nothing. Now, people have neither economic prosperity nor the habitable Nature. To find the answer to this dilemma, Kingsolver takes shelter in history. She tries to unravel the massive mental shift that people went through in accepting Darwin’s theories. With the help of this slice of history, she looks at the present in the hope that if people could adapt to that enormous change, they would be able to adapt to new life choices demanded by the Anthropocene.

Kingsolver’s disappointment is not limited to the arena of the environment but also to contemporary politics. Though no leader is mentioned by name in the novel, there are enough hints that make it clear that she is talking about the candidate winning the USA presidential election in 2016. She creates a similar character in the historical part of the novel to completely denounce everything that such leaders represent. Policy changes required to deal with climate change need the will of political leadership. Ghosh also explains this, “If whole societies and polities are to adapt then the necessary decisions will need to be made collectively, within political institutions, as happens in wartime or national emergencies”(72). Kingsolver’s depiction of the natural world remains enchanting, and her portrayal of the botanist Mary Treat, a contemporary of Darwin and Asa Gray, is the icing on the cake.

Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Unsheltered*, published in 2018, depicts two narratives separated by more than a century and joined by the protagonists' residency in the same crumbling house. One narrative depicts the story of the settlement of Vineland as a kind of Utopia in New Jersey after the Civil War, promoting freethinking and enlightenment. This deceptive utopian peace feels threatened by the growing understanding of Darwin's theory and other advances in sciences, which are challenging the conventional dualities between humans and the natural world. The second and contemporary narrative follows Willa Knox and the fortune of her family. Her well-educated son, Zeke, is burdened by education loans and care of his newborn baby when his partner kills herself. Her daughter, Tig, completely rejects the culture of endless production and consumption. Her infirm father-in-law represents the bigoted old-world order. She and her professor husband are facing failure in their careers in a world hit by the economic crisis. Kingsolver brings the politics within this household through these characters. The crumbling house connects her with the narrative of the bygone era when this same house was falling upon the family of Thatcher Greenwood, a young science teacher. The most remarkable feature of this novel remains the historical figure of Mary Treat. Kingsolver highlights the various issues that are symptomatic of today's world in dealing with the climate crisis and uses the past narrative as a normative guide to express the hope that humans have the capacity to adapt to the changes demanded by this new age.

Kingsolver's writings are always replete with lively descriptions of the natural world, and through these descriptions, she beautifully manages to focus on the nonhuman world. Her representation of the nonhuman world vividly depicts the presence of an incomprehensible world that is beyond human imagination. The resultant effect is the realization that we are not separate from the natural world, and we are not intended to rule over it. She also never shies away from direct engagement with the political. In this novel, though the narrative depicts Willa's fears and insecurities, Kingsolver makes her a mouthpiece for the concerns of a generation that is looking forward to a secure retirement. Zeke and Tig represent the opposite poles of debates about how to comprehend life in this new world. Hurricane Sandy is chosen as a metaphorical symbol of a disaster brought upon themselves by people, and yet they do not want to accept their continued complicity in such phenomena. Vineland bears the signs of the damage caused by it:

The end of September had brought two giant storms, the thrashing tails of hurricanes brewed up over the Atlantic that came in oversize and early. People's idle talk of the weather had gone quiet, as if it might bring bad luck, while TV forecasters discussed categories of storm surge and wind speeds previously unseen. Even this far inland, New

Jersey was still recovering from Hurricane Sandy, which in its time, a few years back, had been called the storm of the century. (*Unsheltered* 153)

Whereas humans measure the vastness of their lives over centuries, the disruptions caused by climate change surpass such measurements and impact the earth's systems. Hurricane Sandy again comes in the foreground when Willa visits the Pine Barrens, where Mary Treat made several of her discoveries. On her way, she sees farms abandoned due to bankruptcy. On such a farm, she sees a sign with the following words: "DEAR MOTHER NATURE, PLEASE SPANK SANDY!" (*Unsheltered* 348). The irony of this sign rankles her. The idea of freedom, the idea of being in charge of one's destiny, and other such ideas are getting interrogated. The damage caused by Hurricane Sandy is visible in the State Park at Cape May when Willa visits it to get out of the falling house for a brief period of relief. The analogy of the collapsing house and the damage to the Park overlaps and joins Willa's personal sorrow with the state of affairs of the world. Some parts of the Park are inaccessible because the damage done by Sandy couldn't be repaired due to a lack of funds. Kingsolver's metaphor of a collapsing house becomes directly linked with the visible effects of the climate crisis. Willa's tirades capture the helplessness, "Damn Hurricane Sandy and the damn Park Service budget cuts. We can't afford to stop doing the shit that's screwing up the weather, and we can't afford to pick up the pieces after we do our shit" (*Unsheltered* 172). The power of imagination can give us metaphors to comprehend the world around us. Kingsolver uses the metaphor to join earth-centered and human-centered. She creates many such incidents through metaphors or direct dialogues. Despite her hopelessness, Willa sees glimpses of the wonders of the nonhuman world:

This peninsula was the jumping-off point for most of the migratory birds from New England to upper Canada, millions of them, all headed south. Every year, but especially in this one with its two big storms, birds congregated en masse while they waited for good weather and the gumption to launch themselves out. Willa was amazed. She'd never given a thought to these little lives hurtling themselves over the dark ocean, their tiny brains still big enough to dream of a warm jungle on the far side of a god-awful journey. (*Unsheltered* 168)

Again, the sight of the swallows moving together like one shape inspires wonder and amazement and hints at the repercussions that climate change will have on the nonhuman world:

They stood for a longtime, hypnotized by the trembling bush. It must have been a bird ritual, the drumming up of collective will to take the blind leap of faith, forsaking all safety to fly across an ocean to the southern hemisphere. How could they trust something

so unknown, and for how many years had they done it, Willa wondered: A thousand? Ten thousand? While humans altered everything on the face of their world, these birds kept believing in a map that never changed. (*Unsheltered* 177-178)

Kingsolver creates such moments to juxtapose human history with Earth's history. The frustrations that Willa is experiencing in her personal life become entangled with her frustration with the world in general. But she still hopes that the old ways will improve the state of affairs; she is not ready to see the futility of the old and trusted methods. Only her daughter Tig is able to locate her place in the land of wastefulness. Toward the end, Willa begins to believe in the choices of her daughter, and she agrees to give her custody of Zeke's baby. She knows that people like her fail to see "human-caused connection" to such weather phenomena (*Unsheltered* 414). The scariest aspect for Willa is the fear of the unknown, and loss of the shelter; for Tig it is an opportunity to be free, and "waste not, want not" is her way of living.

Kingsolver traces the patterns of human behavior in the past. When Willa starts researching the history of her house in order to secure finances for its renovation, she chances upon the story of Thatcher Greenwood and Mary Treat. Modern America is like the "elysian vision" that was presented by Landis to people while settling Vineland. The past narrative follows Thatcher Greenwood's stay for one year in 1874 in the same house. Like Willa, he is also facing a crumbling house, and the world is undergoing a sea change with new emerging scientific theories. Darwin's theory of evolution is hated by his principal, Cutler, and the land baron Landis. But the resistance put by brave people like Thatcher gives Willa hope: "A great shift was dawning, with the human masters' place in the kingdom much reduced from its former glory. She could see how this might lead to a sense of complete disorientation in the universe. But still. The old paradigm was an obsolete shell; the writing on the wall was huge. They just wouldn't read" (*Unsheltered* 391).

Kingsolver creates a remarkable persona of scientist Mary Treat and her discoveries. Through Mary, Kingsolver divides people into two groups: "the investigators" and "the sweeteners" (*Unsheltered* 41). More than anything, Kingsolver highlights her scientific temperament. The conversations between Thatcher and Mary and the latter's work underscore that scientific temperament can always make sense of the human world, which is evolving with the rest of nature. Mary's dedication and love for her work make Thatcher observe, "This forest was home to her" (*Unsheltered* 188), and again, "Mary held herself to standards outside ordinary human existence" (*Unsheltered* 190). She carefully observes certain species like swamp pinks and a fern *Schizaea pusilla*. Her observations foreground the importance of the basic principles

of adaptation and evolution. By including these details in simple conversation, Kingsolver provides explanations as to why so many species are going extinct due to humans' interference with the delicate balance in the natural world. Mary Treat has discovered that this particular fern, *Schizaea pusilla*, is found only in one specific place in the entire bog area, and her attempts to plant it at other places in the same bog resulted in failure. To Thatcher's query, she remarks, "And one has to ask, why would a species persist in only one small place? What element of a new environment impedes them?" (*Unsheltered* 191). Mary Treat's character and fictional Thatcher are presented as exemplars to instill belief in readers that in the past also, we have seen the old-world order give way to the new rational thinking. This struggle is continuing, and Kingsolver expresses hope in humans' ability to adapt. As Willa tries to reconcile herself to the new realities of life, such as finding happiness in whatever she has, she decides to donate old things that she does not need. Watching her grandson attempting to walk, she compares his efforts with humans' capacity to adapt to a changing world: "First they would stagger, then grow competent, and then forget the difficulty altogether while thinking of other things, and that was survival" (*Unsheltered* 454). Though the novel denounces the capitalist economy and freemarket even in the guise of sustainable growth, it fails to provide alternatives other than individual choices. It remains a story of individuals and the glimpses of collective behavior, reflected in the natural world at the level of species, seem impossible in the human world.

Kingsolver engages her readers with the different perspectives within Willa's house. Zeke believes in sustainable growth and thinks that they are "disrupting the conventional models," while Tig declares, "Humans have outgrown the carrying capacity of the planet" (*Unsheltered* 65). Kingsolver leans toward Tig as she shows Zeke unable to see through any of his plans. He becomes detached from his baby in his pursuit of his career. Tig, shortened for Antigone, becomes representative of resistance to bigness. She is short and lean. Willa first contemplates this idea of bigness when she watches her father-in-law's ashes in an urn, "It didn't even make sense that this was Nick. That such a very large man, when all was said and done—when a lot was said and done—could be reduced to a couple of heaping handfuls of gritty white powder" (*Unsheltered* 386). These lines capture the irony of the human ego. Willa ponders this thought again while thinking of Tig and the other nephew and niece of her husband, "Tig, Art, Takis, these anomalous, scrappy survivors, might be the lucky ones. They ate less and took up less space: the humans of the future" (*Unsheltered* 396). Can this also be true about artistic productions? Kingsolver does not venture into that conversation, but her novels that engage with climate change are not small.

At a time when rich countries are supposed to lead the way toward lowering the carbon footprint, the victory of climate deniers perplexes Willa. She exclaims about the winning politician: “He’s legitimizing personal greed as the principal religion of our country” (*Unsheltered* 352). Kingsolver manages to depict the predicaments of the climate age, yet the resolution in this novel comes through individual choices. Though Tig has a boyfriend and friends who are surviving on minimum consumption and togetherness, the novel does not present any viable solution or ways to deal with these predicaments. Willa narrates to her husband Tig’s answers to the climate crisis and the political situations: “[T]oday’s problems can’t be solved by today’s people, we just keep shoring up our bankruptcy with the only tools we know” and “[W]e’re overdrawn at the bank, at the level of our species, but we don’t want to hear it” (*Unsheltered* 352-353). These justifications of how humans are not able to comprehend the devastating effects that their everyday lives may be causing at the global level do not exactly revive the hope that Kingsolver is aiming for through Tig and others like her. Tig’s utopian descriptions of life in Cuba do not include the conflicts between individual liberty and authoritative state powers. Kingsolver’s success lies in representing the nonhuman world as an integral part of human life so that we can live our lives with full awareness of humanity’s place on the earth.

This novel falters on two planes. One is the forced characterization, especially of Tig. Kingsolver creates a dialogue between two groups of people through Tig and Willa but the traits that make a character alive are missing in Tig. Tig seems too perfect: “Tig the mighty,” and again “tiny but mighty,” who is capable of doing everything without complaining. Kingsolver’s portrayal of Tig’s Mexican boyfriend and his family, and her depiction of Tig’s Cuban lover and his family are also too simplified to be depictions of real people. Willa’s mental rant at Zeke’s Indian girlfriend is blatantly stereotyping. Even the name of the girlfriend, Priya, shows Kingsolver has made no attempt at understanding her character. The stereotyping of Indian families bordering on racism, is unbelievable considering Kingsolver is always careful while mentioning people of other ethnicity even if it is done through her characters. The second plane where this novel falls short is Kingsolver’s rejection of the idea of bigness. This very novel seems to be contradicting her favor for lean, small, and petite. *Unsheltered* is a big novel. Despite these shortcomings, this novel captures the heartfelt agony of a writer who is bewildered at the apathy of people to something sinister and dangerous that is threatening their existence and their only home in the cosmos.

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