

## A HEAVEN BUILT IN HELL: THE POOR COMMUNITIES THAT ARISE IN DISASTER

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is a study of Paolo Bacigalupi's dystopian novel *The Water Knife* (2015). Water being scarce is a privilege for the rich and an expensive luxury for the poor in this work. Hence the rich always stay wet and the poor are dry. The novel shows the struggles of both the rich and the poor to gain access to water. The paper analyses the use of cognitive estrangement to develop this dystopian world and utilizes the framework of "life boat ethics" and "collective" used by Janet Fiskio and Rebecca Solnit in the analysis of dystopian science fiction. The paper shows that Bacigalupi portrays the life boat narrative as well as the narrative of the collective in the work. The paper argues that the idea of the collective is redefined through this work. Unlike the collectives formed as part of people's movement, the resistance demonstrated here is a demand/forceful acquisition of the privileges of the rich.*

*Key Words: Bacigalupi, dystopia, cognitive estrangement, water, life boat, collective*

Water has engaged our imaginations through powerful ways in literature. Rivers in spate, oceanic fury, the human tale of survival on the sea have been staple diet in epics, poetry and fiction. As the abundance of water has disappeared from the earth, so has it disappeared from twenty first century fiction. The world of fiction today presents a disturbing future, in which wars are waged over water, where the right to water is more prominent than the right to life. Water wars here are a fearful nightmare and only the rich stay wet here. This paper would examine Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015), a dystopian thriller about climate change and drought in the south-western United States. The novel imagines a future when water would be stolen to maintain the wealthy. The life for the underprivileged is a constant struggle. This work would be analysed by using the ideas of "life boat ethics" and the "collective" proposed by Janet Fiskio. Through the

former, the self-interest of the rich and through the latter the methods of resilience and survival of the underprivileged in the work will be studied. The novel can be treated as an example of the collective that rises and breaks into the havens created by the rich for their survival.

Paolo Bacigalupi (b. 1972) is an American science fiction and fantasy writer. *The Water Knife* is Paolo Bacigalupi's sixth novel, and is based on his short story "The Tamarisk Hunters." His short fiction has been collected in *Pump Six and Other Stories* (2008). His debut novel *The Windup Girl*, published in 2009, won the Hugo, Nebula Awards in 2010.

In Bacigalupi's words,

The Colorado River is portrayed as a black ribbon of water, twisting through desert, cutting between ragged mountain ridges. "It would like a serpent through the pale scapes of the desert. California hadn't put this stretch of river into a straw yet, but it would" (Bacigalupi 11).

Dystopian literature "takes what already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current sociocultural, political, or scientific developments to their potentially devastating conclusions" (Canavan 180). The developments are the "ethical, economic, and epistemological assumptions and consequent practices that prevail today and structure modern life" (Canavan 180). In Bacigalupi's work, Catherine Case and her water knife Angel Velasquez are representative of the tyrannical governments. Even an inkling of the presence of new or untapped natural sources of water is capitalised and corporatized by Catherine Case. Case's total control over water turns her into one no less than a demon. Bearing the brunt of the frequent dust storms and the authoritarian grip are ordinary people like Maria, Sara or the journalist Lucy. They are dehumanised and are the disposable citizens. Being an epitaph for a dystopian future, *The Water Knife* revolves around the doctrine rich stay wet, while the poor get nothing but dust.

Ideas of bleak futures are not uncommon in dystopic works. In Bacigalupi, this is accentuated with □ cognitive estrangement. □ It refers to □ ...literary effort to renew reader's perception of normalized, unseen social reality by presenting unfamiliar objects and situations (...) that are nevertheless rationally of this reality" (quoted in Canavan et.al 181). Cognitive estrangement is similar to Brecht's *Verfremdung* or alienation. In this

work two ideas stand cognitively estranged to the reader. One is the idea of an arcology and the second one is the water knife. Arcology is a portmanteau word formed by combining architecture and ecology. In this architectural design, self-contained human habitats are designed. The original idea behind an arcology was to minimise the human impact on the environment. But in the novel this idea is defamiliarized. In the dystopic world here, the human induced destruction of the environment is nearly total. The remaining natural resources are channelised to maintain the life in the arcologies. Anyone entering an arcology is awed by the dust free, unpolluted atmosphere, freely flowing water from flushes or showers and even the presence of water spewing fountains. Instead of minimal human impact, the arcologies in the novel exhibit maximum exploitation of resources. Exploitation of scarce reserves of water require surveillance and brute power. Both are provided by people who are referred to as water knives. The water knife cut the reserves of water that may be used by other arcologies fiercely guarding the available resources simultaneously. They help the rich to remain wet and ensures that the poor remain dry.

Water in Bacigalupi “symbolizes the contested policies and the geographic and cultural spaces between [...] communities that hold unequal powers.” (Sze 476) In climatically deranged future, the ownership of water is a tool of domination; no form of resilience is possible. Injustice is the result of strategic planning by people of power. In this futuristic scenario, United States is no longer a nation, and states fight with each other for water. The rich live in Arcologies, sealed biomes that use natural symbiotic processes to recirculate water with great efficiency. With many of his prominent works, Paolo Bacigalupi actuates a reconsideration of prepotent ways of thinking in response to ecological degradation and its related social ramifications.

Rebecca Solnit observes in her work *A Paradise Built in Hell*, accounts of disaster express a fundamental debate about human nature: whether humans are intrinsically selfish or essentially altruistic and resilient (Solnit 3). Drawing on Solnit's framework of two opposing worldviews, “Social Darwinists” and “mutual aid,” Janet Fiskio proposes that two dominant narratives emerge in global climate change discourse. The first one is a narrative called the “lifeboat” (following Garrett Hardin), in which the neo classical economic view of humans as rational agents who make choices to further their self-

interest prevails. Here comes the example of Angel Velasquez from *The Water Knife*. The second one is a narrative called the “ collective” where humanity is depicted as essentially courageous.

The lifeboat narrative draws on Social Darwinism, which imagines human behaviour in a monolithic way (as a struggle for survival) and ignores historical, cultural, economic and political contingencies. Catherine Case is the one to offer this kind of a lifeboat to those people whose water she easily made her possession. Her lifeboat was for the rich where they could themselves into the Taiyang Arcology or sealed biomes. Water was in plenty here. Her “ offer was simple: works, money, water-life... she’ d let them drink. May be even let them smear a bit of water across the land... one last chance to haul themselves out of the abyss” (Bacigalupi 81). All ruthless decisions are centred around water- people who are murdered are hydrologists, the little water resources possessed by competing groups are bombed and water knives mercilessly carry out her orders. In order to maintain the lifeboat of the rich, all the others pay a heavy price.

In the American South, as portrayed by Bacigalupi, rules are what the big dogs say they are. Refugees, the ordinary masses, are mere “ rats running for their lifeboats” (Bacigalupi 262). The reasons they pay exorbitant taxes are only to let the powerful men forget to kill them today. That’ s what they buy with tax- a day’ s life. The ordinary people who emerge in this life boat narrative are the dispensable and disposable citizens. These citizens are constantly reminded of their “ proper” places and any attempt to aspire for a better life ends in death or maiming for life. There are hawks, owls, coyotes and snakes; and all they want to do is eat the vulnerable people up. Several characters are dispensed with in this fashion in the novel like Lucy’ s friend Jamie. Jamie’ s executioners had carved a story into his ruined flesh, his torture stood out, intimate and nasty. He was probably killed several times, and then revived. Toomie, another character had his eyes pried out.

In Solnit’ s words, the “ lifeboat” is a spectre of individuals struggling for survival in a neo- Malthusian world of diminishing resources (Solnit 88). In *The Water Knife* there is a promise that lifeboat abounds in prosperity and privileges anyone can dream of. So, everybody’ s dream is an access to these lifeboats. The life boats in this novel are the arcologies carefully built and protected from the onslaught of the outside world. The most

preferred arcology is the Taiyang Arcology under the patronage and protection of Catherine Case and her water knives. Catherine Case is the privileged captain of Arcologies in America and holds the sceptre of power in her lifeboat.

Bacigalupi portrays the privileged few in *Taiyang* Arcology who are on a safe lifeboat saying “ people living inside triple-filter apartments. Clean air, perfectly recycled water, their own farms, everything they needed to live... fountains and waterfalls. The plants growing everywhere. Air that never smelled like smoke or exhaust” (Bacigalupi 89), a kind of lost Eden at the cost of “ a bunch of Texans” (Bacigalupi 90). There is so much abundance, but only for the rich:

Even though people called Catherine Case a killer because her water knives cut so hard along the Colorado, Angel knew they were wrong when he inhaled the eucalyptus and honeysuckle scents of Cypress. Case had Angel learning how to do everything from read a legal contract to plant heavy explosives. Plenty of people washed out, but Angel thrived. The Queen of the Colorado knighted him. She gave him residence permits in Cypress I, bequeathed upon him driver’ s licences and bank accounts, badges and uniforms. He took on roles “ easily as a chameleon changing colours to fit each new task, shedding identities as easily as a snake sheds skin” (Bacigalupi 55).

Although many environmentalists today reject lifeboat ethics, this view continues to influence environmental debates, especially in its socio- economic articulation as the tragedy of the commons (Heise 25-26).

In the second narrative, which Janet Fiskio calls the “ collective,” humanity is imagined as essentially courageous and generous in the face of climate chaos. The collective includes the underprivileged who have been forcefully left out of the lifeboat and who cannot make any stake in the privileged life of the rich. Yet they boldly become a part of the collective. The idea of the collective has been explained along with “ life boat” by Rebecca Solnit in her *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009). Accordingly, disaster survivors often share a feeling of belonging and a sense of unity which is impossible to achieve under normal circumstances. The collective is similar to any people’ s movement that develops in the face of a crisis. The entrance to a life boat is achieved through money and power by the rich whereas the entry to the lifeboat for the “ collective” can only be achieved through force.

Maria, a Texan refugee turned into a party girl in the novel, considers bold action in the face of climate chaos and apocalypse. Initially she and her friend Sara dream of a space within the arcology with money. She earnestly believes that money can be made by selling the water that she has hoarded cheaply. However, her harsh experiences of attempting to sell water and penalty at the hands of her torturers who nearly feed her to the hungry and beastly coyotes hardens her. At the end of the novel when Lucy the altruistic, Pulitzer winning journalist attempts to think and distribute water in terms of the common good, it is Maria who reacts instantaneously knowing fully well that altruism has no place at the hands of the likes of Catherine Case. She achieves her collective identity only through shooting Lucy thus befriendng Angel and being promised a heaven for her dust-stricken dreams. Though Angel was the most sought-after water knife of Catherine Case, he is easily abandoned. Like Maria, he learns the hard way that the existence in the arcology can be achieved partly through force and partly by befriendng the likes of Case. Her friend, the maimed Toomie too possesses a kind of agency only in the end which is evident through his words; “ we’ re all each other’ s people. Just like we’ re all our brother’ s keepers. We forget it sometimes” (Bacigalupi 250). Toomie, instead of taking Maria’ s money, let her have a burnt *pupusa* he would have given to a mangy mongrel dog that hung close by the construction site. He called her his little queen. Together Angel, Maria, and Toomie created a “ collective” community in *The Water Knife*.

From the point of view of the refugee, the lifeboat is anything but utopian. It is the collective with its “ authentic solidarity” that creates the possibility of a future for humanity in this hell. Human nature is courageous in disaster. In this vision of the future of humanity, it is the refugee who brings hope to a world in the process of collapse. However, it must be affirmed that the idea of the “ collective” is slightly different from the collective people’ s movements. People’ s movements often think in terms of common good. These movements are aimed at bringing the multinational corporations or capitalist forces to their knees. Solnit’ s idea of the “ collective” that is seen in this work is hardly idealistic. The new idea of the collective that emerges here is only an infringement of the capitalist/ corporatized space on the life boat by the underprivileged. The fight is not against the building of an arcology or even against the likes of Catherine Case. Instead, it is the carving of a space in this privileged arcology even for a pauper.



This paper had attempted to provide an ecotopic reading of Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife*. In using Janet Fiskio and Rebecca Solnit's ideas of the "life boat ethics" and formation of a "collective" in the face of disaster, it attempted to show that the rich may stay wet in their privileged life boats, but that does not deter the collective movement of the poor to rise against the rich. Disasters and catastrophes make ordinary people realise that they matter. People discover their voice, personal agency and collective power which provides the hope for changes in their lives. The paper showed that the idea of the collective is redefined in the novel.

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