

An Eco-Critical Comparison of Environmental Crisis in *The Water Knife* and *New York 2140*

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares how *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi and *New York 2140* by Kim Stanley Robinson show the effects of climate change and environmental crisis. Using eco-criticism, the study explores how both novels imagine future worlds shaped by water scarcity, rising sea levels, and social inequality. It looks at how people survive in these harsh conditions and how the environment shapes politics, economy, and daily life. The paper shows how both authors use fiction to warn about real-world environmental problems and the urgent need for change.

Keywords- Eco-criticism, climate change, environmental crisis, dystopia, *The Water Knife*, *New York 2140*.

Ecocritical studies analyze the relationship between literature, culture, and the environment, offering a lens through which to examine climate change, including how it's represented in literature and how it shapes our understanding of nature and human-environment interactions. Particularly in light of the current environmental crisis, the critical approach of ecocriticism—which explores the relationship between literature and the natural world—has grown in importance within the area of literary studies. Ecocriticism, which has its roots in the growing awareness of humankind's environmental impact, aims to investigate how literature represents, challenges, and shapes our understanding of the natural world and ecological issues. It focusses on the representation of ecosystems, landscapes, environmental ethics, and, more lately, climate change in literature.

Literary narratives have used climate change as a primary theme, which is undoubtedly the most pressing issue of our day. Literature has been a potent tool for expressing the fears, moral quandaries, and emotional reactions that come with the environmental issue, from early warnings of environmental degradation to dystopian visions of a future devastated by climate change. As the field of ecocriticism grows, it explores

more deeply how literary works particularly those written in English address the unimaginable effects of climate change, like increasing sea levels, mass extinctions, and environmental collapse. The literary analysis of climate change, commonly referred to as "cli-fi" (climate fiction), serves to both increase readers' awareness and force them to face the realities of the Anthropocene a term used to characterise the current geological era in which human activity is the primary force influencing the environment. Climate change has been woven into the writings of authors such as Margaret Atwood, Amitav Ghosh, and Ian McEwan, who combine scientific concerns with human emotions, ethics, and politics.

Scholars like Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty popularised the term "ecocriticism" in the 1990s with their collection *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). This anthology established ecocriticism as a unique critical method by bringing together key writings. Nonetheless, the movement's origins may be traced back to the 1970s, when literary experts started investigating nature writing and how landscapes were portrayed in pastoral and Romantic literature.

Inspired by Romantic authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Wordsworth, this early ecocriticism frequently concentrated on grieving the destruction of the natural world and praising its beauty. With the development of the discipline, ecocriticism broadened its purview to cover more theoretical and critical analyses of the ways in which literature addresses environmental problems such as pollution, deforestation, species extinction, and climate change. With researchers focussing on the global environmental crisis in the aftermath of the Anthropocene—a term used to describe the current geological period in which human activity profoundly damages the Earth's ecosystems—the discipline saw a renewed sense of urgency in the 21st century. As a literary philosophy, ecocriticism is interdisciplinary by nature. Drawing on the fields of ecology, environmental history, philosophy, ethics, and social justice, it emphasises the importance of literature in promoting environmental knowledge and activism. Within this framework, literature functions not just as a window onto the natural world but also as a platform for ethical and political discourse, able to subvert prevailing narratives of resource extraction and human advancement.

Climate change is a global issue that has serious effects on both the natural world and human society. Many writers use fiction to explore what our future might look like if climate change continues unchecked. Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* are two novels that imagine different kinds of environmental disasters and how people respond to them. While *The Water Knife* shows a world falling apart because of drought and water shortages, *New York 2140* presents a flooded future where people still manage to survive and adapt. In both novels, nature is not just a setting it becomes an active force that shapes human life, politics, and survival. Through an eco-critical lens, especially using the ideas of nature's agency and toxic discourse, we can see how each novel presents nature as powerful, unpredictable, and deeply connected to human choices.

In *The Water Knife*, the story takes place in the near future in the American Southwest, where a long-lasting drought has dried up rivers, destroyed cities, and created desperate living conditions. Water has become the most valuable resource, and people will kill to control it. States like Arizona, Nevada, and California are fighting over water rights, and the government has almost no control. The environment in this novel is harsh and deadly. Dust storms, heat, and dry landscapes dominate the world, making it nearly impossible to grow food or find clean water. In eco-critical terms, this is an example of toxic discourse a way of describing nature as dangerous, broken, and harmful. Nature here is no longer a peaceful background, but a threat to human survival. It punishes people who overused and abused it in the past. This gives nature a kind of agency, meaning it acts like a

character with power over humans. People are not just living in nature; they are struggling against it.

In contrast, *New York 2140* imagines a different kind of climate disaster. In this novel, global warming has melted polar ice, causing the sea levels to rise more than 50 feet. Much of New York City is underwater, and people live in the upper floors of buildings that now stand like islands. Even though the flooding has changed the city completely, society has not fully collapsed. People still have jobs, technology still works, and communities come together to solve problems. Nature has taken back parts of the city, and human life now depends on living with water, not fighting it. This is another example of nature's agency, but it is presented more positively. The ocean has changed the way people live, but it hasn't destroyed everything. The city becomes a hybrid space—part land, part water—where people are learning to adapt. Robinson's story suggests that even in the face of climate change, cooperation and hope are possible. Nature is still powerful, but not entirely hostile.

Although both novels deal with the results of climate change, they offer very different messages about the future. In *The Water Knife*, nature is shown as violent and unforgiving. It reflects the consequences of past human greed, especially the overuse of water and the failure to plan for the future. The people in this world fight over natural resources, and society becomes crueler and divided. Nature's power is shown through its destruction, and the story focuses on survival in a world where help is gone. On the other hand, *New York 2140* offers a more balanced view. Nature is still a challenge—floods, storms, and rising water make life hard—but the characters learn to work together. The flooded city becomes a symbol of change, not just loss. Robinson shows that humans can find new ways to live, even after disaster. In both novels, nature's agency is clear—it controls much of what happens. But while Bacigalupi uses toxic discourse to highlight danger and collapse, Robinson uses a more hopeful tone, showing that adaptation is still possible.

In both *The Water Knife* and *New York 2140*, we see two very different ways societies interact with nature. In *The Water Knife*, the relationship is based on exploitation. People try to control and steal natural resources mainly water their own survival or profit. The government and powerful corporations fight over water rights, cutting off cities like Phoenix and Las Vegas from clean water. Nature is treated like a product to own, not something to respect or live with. The characters are mostly trying to survive by competing with each other, not working together with the environment. In contrast, *New York 2140* shows a society that is trying to cooperate with nature. Even though most of New York City is flooded due to rising sea levels, people find ways to live with water instead of fighting it. They travel by boat, create floating farms, and rebuild communities in

flooded skyscrapers. The characters understand that nature cannot be controlled, and instead, they adapt to its power. This shows a more respectful and balanced relationship between people and the planet.

Both novels criticize how capitalist systems have contributed to ecological destruction. In *The Water Knife*, capitalism is shown as a driving force behind environmental collapse. Water is no longer seen as a basic human right it becomes a luxury item controlled by the rich. Private water companies and corrupt officials use laws and violence to take water from poor communities. The novel shows how greed and the desire for profit lead to the destruction of both nature and human life. This reflects real-world concerns about how large companies often put profit over the health of the planet. *New York 2140* also shows the negative effects of capitalism, especially how banks and investors continue to make money even after climate disasters. Some characters, like the young hackers or the social activists, fight against the system and try to build a fairer society. Robinson shows that the root of climate problems is not just nature, but also human systems that value money more than the environment. Both novels suggest that unless we change these systems, environmental crises will only get worse.

Another major theme in both books is the disconnect between modern humans and nature. In *The Water Knife*, most people have forgotten how to live in harmony with the land. The natural world is something to fear, not understand. Cities are cut off from natural water sources, and people rely on artificial systems or bottled water just to survive. This shows how far humans have moved away from nature, and how that disconnection makes them more vulnerable during environmental crises. *New York 2140*, while more hopeful, also shows that many people have become too dependent on technology and the urban world. Some characters live in luxury towers and barely notice the floods outside. However, others like the co-op members or the building residents try to reconnect with the environment by growing food, sharing resources, and respecting the water that surrounds them. Robinson seems to say that we need to rebuild our relationship with nature if we want to survive climate change. Both novels suggest that when humans ignore the natural world, they suffer the consequences.

Despite the environmental disasters, people in both novels come up with adaptation strategies to survive. In *The Water Knife*, the main strategies are migration and violence. People flee from ruined cities like Phoenix to places where water is still available, such as Colorado or Nevada. However, these areas are controlled by powerful groups who use armed forces to protect their water. Technology is also used, but mostly by the rich for example, building water recycling towers or protected domes. Poor people are left to die. In *New York 2140*, adaptation is more collective and innovative.

The whole city changes: people move into the upper floors of buildings, use boats for travel, and build systems to handle floods. Technology is used in more sustainable ways, like tidal energy, vertical farming, and climate tracking. Urban life is restructured to fit with the new watery landscape. Migration still happens, but many people choose to stay and transform their home instead of running away. This shows a more creative and hopeful vision of climate adaptation, where human beings learn to work with nature rather than escape it.

In *The Water Knife*, water is the most important symbol it represents both life and power. Those who control water control everything, which turns it into a political weapon. Water is no longer freely available to everyone; it is bought, stolen, and fought over. At the same time, the lack of water or drought symbolizes death, decay, and social collapse. Cities like Phoenix are drying up, and people are dying not just from thirst, but from the failure of justice and compassion. This turns drought into a symbol of both environmental and moral crises. Nature is not just background here it becomes a tool used by powerful people to control others, showing how deeply the environment is tied to politics and survival.

Both *The Water Knife* and *New York 2140* present powerful visions of environmental collapse, but they do so in very different ways. *The Water Knife* paints a dark, dystopian picture of a world ruined by drought, water scarcity, and political greed. The collapse is brutal and immediate, showing how quickly society can fall apart when nature is pushed too far. In contrast, *New York 2140* offers a slower, more gradual crisis caused by rising sea levels. Although the city is flooded, society still functions, and people find creative ways to live in their new environment. These two visions allow us to see the range of possible outcomes in a climate-changed future from total breakdown to difficult but hopeful transformation.

Both novels offer important warnings and lessons. *The Water Knife* warns us about the dangers of continuing to exploit natural resources without limits. It shows that if water and other basic needs are turned into tools of power, society becomes violent and divided. The novel also suggests that ignoring environmental issues will lead to suffering for the most vulnerable. *New York 2140*, while also critical of capitalism and environmental neglect, gives readers a more optimistic message. It shows that even after great damage, it is still possible for people to adapt, work together, and build better systems. These narratives remind us that the climate crisis is not just about science—it is about human choices, systems, and values.

Literature plays a key role in helping us understand and imagine the impacts of climate change. Through storytelling, novels like *The Water Knife* and *New York 2140* bring abstract issues like global warming, sea level rise, and drought into everyday

human experience. They make us feel the urgency of the crisis and challenge us to think about how we respond as individuals and as societies. In the context of this dissertation, these works support the broader argument that climate change is not only an environmental issue but a social and cultural one. They show how different communities adapt or fail to adapt to a changing world. By comparing these two novels, we gain deeper insight into the possibilities of collapse, cooperation, and resilience, and we see how literature can be a powerful tool for exploring and shaping our response to the climate crisis.

In *New York 2140*, floodwater also carries double meaning it shows ruin, but also renewal. The flooded city is a symbol of past mistakes, rising sea levels caused by human carelessness. But the water also transforms the city into something new a water-based world where people live in tall towers, travel by boat, and rebuild their communities. The imagery of regeneration is strong here, suggesting that change can bring new life, even after disaster. The city is decaying in some ways, but it also resists collapse. This reflects eco-critical themes of entropy (the breakdown of systems) and resistance (the human will to adapt and survive). In both novels, the environment is full of meaning it speaks through symbols, reminding us of nature's power to destroy, renew, and reshape human life.

To sum up, both *The Water Knife* and *New York 2140* imagine a future shaped by the climate crisis, but they do so in very different ways. Bacigalupi's novel warns us about the dangers of ignoring water scarcity and shows a bleak, violent world where nature becomes the enemy. Robinson's novel, while also serious about climate change, offers a more optimistic view in which people adapt to new challenges and build a better future. Eco-critical concepts like nature's agency and toxic discourse help us understand how these stories treat the environment not as a background, but as an active part of the story. These novels remind us that nature reacts to human actions, and that how we respond to environmental change will shape our future. Through fiction, we are encouraged to think deeply about the choices we make today, and how they will affect the world of tomorrow.

In both *The Water Knife* and *New York 2140*, environmental crisis is at the heart of the narrative, shaping human lives, power structures, and future possibilities. Through an eco-critical lens, these novels reveal the deep connections between ecological collapse and social inequality. While *The Water Knife* presents a grim vision of survival and conflict, *New York 2140* offers hope through adaptation and cooperation. Together, they highlight the urgent need for environmental awareness and justice. By imagining different outcomes of climate change, both novels encourage readers to reflect on the choices society makes today for a sustainable tomorrow.

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