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Anthropocentric Infliction of War Over Water Reflected in Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife*

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Abstract:

During the current times, especially in the past two decades of the twenty-first century, experts from the scientific community as well as anthropologists, historians, and environmentalists have voiced concerns about the depleting state of the environment. They have raised questions around the representation of climate change, resource scarcity, and biodiversity loss. The study also explores the different water crises prevailing worldwide. Ecocriticism seeks to understand the influence of humans on the natural world in historically and culturally distinct ways. This study aims to demystify the violence caused by water scarcity in the form of pollution and exploitation of landscapes, human and non-human life, as well as cultural ethics. The study integrates the reality behind the depiction of the author's narrative based on the Colorado River and the American West. The water scarcity advancing in the states of Arizona, Nevada, and California are documented within the plot. The article concentrates on the importance of water and the self-interest of anthropocentric nature in exploiting the naturally available resources to the detriment of other lives, inevitably causing damage to the ecosystem. War-prone social conditions occur due to the scarcity of water.

Keywords: climate change, ecocriticism, resource scarcity, anthropocentric nature, war.

Fred Pearce, in his work, *When the Rivers Run Dry*, introduces the concept that "Wells have been drying up, too. More than half a century of pumping water from beneath the great plains

of the United States” (Pearce 4) has depleted underground water that would take two thousand years to replenish. In India, farmers whose fathers lifted water in buckets now sink boreholes more than half a mile into the rocks and still often find no water. In less than half a century, Saudi Arabia has almost pumped dry one of the three largest underground water reserves on earth. Two-thirds of all the water that humans take from nature is used for agriculture. By some estimates, as much as 10 percent of that water—about 570 million acre-feet of water—ends up in international trade. The water itself is not traded, of course; rather, the products of its use are. Economists sometimes call it “virtual water”. As countries across the world engage in this trade in virtual water, tensions increase. “The biggest net exporter of virtual water is the United States. It sends abroad in traded goods around a third of all the water it withdraws from the natural environment” (Pearce 9).

Paolo Bacigalupi, in his work *The Water Knife* portrays the depletion and insufficiency of fresh water in both natural and built environments, with the weight of climate change hanging in the atmosphere and a recontoured landscape marred by toxicity. John Brinkerhoff Jackson identifies landscape as a composition of man-made spaces on the land, suggesting that it is an assembly of modified spaces designed and intended to serve as infrastructure or background for collective existence. Its purpose is to serve the community, as its collective nature is a universally acknowledged attribute. The imagined or creative sites of dystopia and toxicity express not only the unfolding of an anthropocentric world but also the result of exalting the consideration and visualization of human-centric conception. The novel is set against the backdrop of the pale scrape of desert in which the Colorado River flows, “diminished by droughts and diversions” (Bacigalupi 11), and the dry lands of western America, where cities and states compete for a resource ecologically depleting and economically high-priced in the aftermath of a human-induced crisis.

In *The Water Knife* the water of the Colorado River is a lifesaver. Vegas Knives, Calies, and Zoners from the states of Nevada, California, and Arizona, respectively, are in a contentious state of war aimed at taking advantage of the rumored “senior water rights” which are capable of attaining supremacy of power and control over the water discharged from the Colorado River. In reality, the Colorado River passes across the border of the United States. “It drains one-twelfth of the continental United States; it is the lifeblood of seven states, delivering its water to growing cities, feeding irrigation projects, and generating electricity” (Pearce 42). The two reservoirs that control the flow of the middle of the Colorado River are Lake Mead and Lake Powell, and water

distribution between states often ends up in disputes. Paolo Bacigalupi represents this struggle between states: “The Camel Corps’s two dozen choppers dropped into the river’s canyon, skimming black waters. They wound along its serpentine length, hemmed in on either side by stony hills, sweeping up the liquid curves of the Colorado to the target” (Bacigalupi 11). Water is a precious commodity in California; however, “water politics have been central to its economy. Suffice it to say that, somehow, the farmers became legally entitled to almost three-quarters of the state’s share of the Colorado River. For years, California took more than its required amount” (Pearce 51).

The author sets his plot under the construction of the problems behind the water disputes in the American West. The characters are dragged into a high level of thriller and suffering. The character that defines the power-induced political changes is Catherine Case, under whom all the water knives work. She organizes the struggles between the states. Paolo Bacigalupi introduces her as follows: “People called Catherine Case a killer because her water knives cut so hard along the Colorado, but when Angel inhaled the eucalyptus and honeysuckle scents from Cypress, he knew they were wrong” (Bacigalupi 62). The life systematically and socially keeps some people above and some people below according to the amount of wealth the person holds, even when the world is suffering from great tragedies. The richer people remain unaffected by the problematic society, as seen in the following passage: “Outside, there was only desert and death. But inside, surrounded by jungle greenery and koi ponds, there was life, and Catherine Case was a saint, offering salvation to her flock as she guided them to satisfaction inside the technological wonders of her foresight” (Bacigalupi 62).

War is cruel to the people living hard to save their lives in crucial social circumstances, as depicted in the following lines: “the girl had been dumped like trash. She couldn’t have been much into her teens, and now she was dead in the bottom of the dirty turquoise hole that was bluer than the sky overhead” (Bacigalupi 62). Thus, the author indicates that a war-prone society is uninhabitable for people, a condition caused by the uneven distribution of water between states and people, which is exacerbated by the indifference of both people and governments who fail to take necessary steps in the initial stages. In reality, as indicated by Pearce, a third of all the US’s irrigation water comes from underground, and some states in the south and west would be more or less literally lost without it. In Arizona, the southwest, the aquifer is virtually the only water

resource within the state. Over-pumping in the West is as widespread as on the High Plains. The combined annual over-pumping of the Ogallala, California's central valley, and southeast aquifers has been 30 million acre-feet, resulting in a cumulative loss of underground water storage of over 800 million acre-feet. Where the US leads in the running out of water and the rest of the world follows the same trend of pumping water from underground. All these activities of humans could create a future problem of running out of resources one day, creating dependence on other nations and keeping people in an offensive position. The author notes, "Missiles spat from the chopper's tubes, acres of fires, silent in the air and then explosively loud as they buried themselves in the guts of Carver City's water infrastructure" (Bacigalupi 21). The war conducted because of water, being a water knife, Angel feels, "it's the end of times, Angel thought as more missiles pummeled the water-treatment plant. It's the goddamn end of times... Guess that makes me the Devil." (Bacigalupi 22).

In reality, wars over water are not new. For instance, almost three years after Israel hijacked the waters of the Jordan River, Israel and its Arab neighbors fought the Six-Day War. Histories discuss its importance in terms of land and security, but they overlook the role of water. Before the war, a tenth of Jordan's River basin was within Israel's borders, almost entirely controlled by Israel. The Six-Day War was, by this account, the first modern water war. Israel's seizing of the Jordan River and its catchment remains an essential backdrop to the continuing impasse over the region's future. "With more dams being built all the time, the whole region is in a water crisis," said Hassan Partow at the UN Environment Programme. He indicated this for the crisis in Mesopotamia. All these real-life incidents depict the intensity of the author's idea to create his work on the dispute between states over water: "they all go out. Far below, streams of refugees were flooding out of Carver City. Rivers of tiny ants, all being funneled away from their homes, choppers beat the air overhead" (Bacigalupi 21). All the characters express an opinion on the surrounding disputes as being cruel to survival.

Environmental or ecological violence functions over a domain intercepting the issues embedded deep within socio-political, cultural, economic, scientific, technological, geological, geographical, anthropological, historical, and philosophical discontents of evolutionary humankind. The development models humans intend to ease their life on earth ultimately aim to promote life in urbanization and globalization, to upscale the nation's economics, but they ignore

their impacts on the environment and in the process impair ecosystems, eradicate species, pollute the earth, and diminish resources central to life. In “Environmental Scarcities and Violent Conflict: Evidence from Cases” (1994), possibilities of environmental scarcities and whether they would escalate possibilities of civil violence or intentionally conflicting situations are discussed. The work states that in the upcoming five decades, the earth’s human populace is poised to exceed nine billion, while worldwide economic production might experience a fivefold surge. Escalating scarcities in renewable resources are anticipated. The expanse of fertile agricultural land, as well as forest coverage and the diversity of species they support are expected to diminish. Future generations are likely to encounter extensive depletion and deterioration of aquifers, rivers, and other water reserves, along with diminishing fisheries and the potential for substantial climate shifts. The findings of his research allude to the contribution of environmental scarcities to the rise of violent conflicts stamped as being persistent, diffuse, and operational in sub-national regions. Moreover, the poorest sections of societies will be the most affected, as acute environmental scarcities, such as those of water, forest land, and fertile grounds for cropland, already have adverse impacts on them.

The presence of social conflicts masked by mass mobilization and civil disorder can inspire beneficial changes. However, a fast-moving, unpredictable, complex ecological crisis can tamper with and play with the endeavors intended towards the achievement of social and cultural reforms. The most pressing of all are shortages of agricultural land, forest land, fish, and water. The estimation claims that many parts of the world claim that conflicts over water are widespread. The effect of unclear impacts of climate change, water shortages, and conditions of drought, unnatural flooding, and other environmental catastrophes falls on social conflicts and disputes. The induced infliction of war stated represented in the selected work, initially works on the destruction of Carver City’s water treatment plan to the rise of Texans and Zoners against the suppressors of their lives. The novel indicates, “and then they were hurtling south, toward Mead in question: twenty-six million acre-feet of storage water at inception, now less than half of that thanks to the Big Daddy Drought. An optimistic lake created during an optimistic time, whittled now and falling in silt besides” (Bacigalupi 9). Angel was denoting the destruction of the plant by his Camel Corps gunships intensively destroying, “A lifeline, always threatened and always vulnerable, always on the verge of sinking below Intake No.3, the critical IV drip that kept the heart of Las Vegas pumping” (Bacigalupi 9).

In *The Water Knife* external forces with an urge to control the natural resource—the job of the water knives—is to cut water from other states. In other words, the job of the water knives is similar to that of murderers and eco-terrorists causing damage to the property and lives of people from other states. Catherine Case, based in Las Vegas, and her knives work closely with the Southern Nevada Water Authority or the guardies to ensure that the water from the Colorado River basin stays with them. Water is a commodity affordable for the rich and scarce for the unprivileged, who endure dust and struggle in the misery wrought by its scarcity. In the horde of controlling river water and to save it even from climatic conditions, largely shrunken stretches of the rivers are strawed or piped to prevent exposure to open skies, the burning sun, heat waves, and the storms which are captivated to carry vapors, ignoring the antagonist outcomes it could bequeath on the entire region. The novel quotes a real natural environment becoming a dream for Lucy like this: “the dream had seemed real: the rain pouring down; the softness in the air; the smell of plants blossoming. Her clenched pores and the tight clays of the desert all opening wide welcoming the gift” the earth welcoming the rainwater “the land and her body, absorbing the miracle of water that fell from the sky. God water, American settlers called it once as they invaded slowly across the prairies of the Midwest and then pressed into the arid lands beyond the Rocky Mountains” (Bacigalupi 22).

The dream of the refugee is expressed as follows:

They'd cut their way through to Las Vegas or California or Canada. Hell, they'd cut a path all the way across the ocean to Chongqing or Kunming... with his new skills he could cut through anything – fences and California guardies and all the stupid state border control laws that said you had to stay in a relief zone and starve instead of going where God still poured water from sky (Bacigalupi 43)

It was to go to places that they feel good and contain water for their use and cross all the borders that restrict them in suffering. At the end of the chapter, Marie trying to escape to California is restricted to cross the borders of the Colorado River to the opposite shore; she feels by seeing the river,

They could zoom in and out on satellite views of the towns that ran along the edge of the Colorado River, look at the dams. Look at all the waters and where they lay.

Look at the reservoirs that were still kept full and those that had been drained and turned back into steep, nearly inaccessible canyons. (Bacigalupi 43)

The laid-down water is held in possession of the military, and people can't cross the borders by escaping their snipers. The destruction of Carver City after the depletion of the water treatment plant contributes to

and then she arrived in Carver City and found chaos in the streets and the far shores of the river glinting with sniper scopes and watching militias. It seemed like half of Nevada and California had turned out to make sure the desperate people of Carver City couldn't make a run of it. (Bacigalupi 413)

The water resources in the selected works are polluted by anthropogenic forces, controlled through piping of river water or retaining it behind the high walls of dams. But water is also a sentimental being; it makes its way to free itself even when confined. The slow violence, which is delayed by decades due to the eventual pile of toxicity, urge to control, re-contouring of boundaries, colonizing rivers, explosion of population, and climate change, is depicted as the factors impacting the interaction of humans and water. Through eco-critical analysis of anthropogenic actions, ecological violence manifesting itself in the forms of water-related problems and violence have the tendency to inflate into violence on water resources of the world. Through this violence, water emerges as a faction inducing war between people.

People should recognize that rivers provide various necessities to people; they provide fish and silts and recharge for underground reserves. Water purges and purifiers are virtues in flood pulses and in the mixing of land and water on a river's floodplain. It requires us to find ways of storing water without wrecking the environment, of restoring water to rivers and refilling lakes and wetlands without leaving people thirsty, and of sharing waters rather than fighting over them. It requires us to go with the flow and to do it before the rivers finally run dry (Pearce 4). Recorded history has noted wars being held between nations for various reasons and the difficult conditions people have faced during those war-prone times. The selected author indicates that if people continue to use their resources available in a lavish manner, the reason for scarcity would cause a fight and dependency in the future. To indicate this, Paolo Bacigalupi creates an environment to propose direct awareness that could hold a place in the minds of the people and, importantly, in

the actions of future generations. The government has to take necessary steps to stop a catastrophe and to avoid submerging the people of the world.

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