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Scarcity, Survival, and Environmental Justice: An Ecocritical Reading of Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Tamarisk Hunter"

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Abstract— *This article examines Paolo Bacigalupi's short story "The Tamarisk Hunter'" through the lens of ecocriticism, political ecology, and environmental justice. Given that this is a story set in a future where water serves as the fundamental limiting factor, the narrative explores the ways in which environmental degradation alters work, the way we live, and the nature of power. As Lolo is a tamarisk hunter, the story is used to explore the relationship between the control of natural resources and issues of economic survival and the exercise of institutional power. Drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence", it is revealed that the effects of ecological crisis are not distributed equally, since the poor and the disempowered are the ones who suffer the most. The story is a potent example of the way in which the political economy of climate change is inextricably linked to questions of inequality and the very nature of survival in an age of ecological crisis.*

Keywords— ***Climate fiction; ecocriticism; water scarcity; environmental justice; political ecology; climate precarity.***

This is a study that brings together literary analysis, ecocriticism, and political ecology to argue that water scarcity is not simply an environmental problem but a system which produces unequal power and vulnerability. Bacigalupi's "The Tamarisk Hunter" is used to demonstrate how the resource crisis is exacerbated by unequal control and distribution of power. Since Lolo's position as a tamarisk hunter is a position of extreme precarity, it reveals important truths about the link between environmental destruction and social issues, such as economic survival, class, and institutional power. The dystopia serves as a critique of the social and economic systems that produce such vulnerability in the face of an ecological crisis. The thesis is situated at the intersection of the ecological (drought and scarcity), the socioeconomic (the precariousness of labour and class), and the literary (dystopia and climate fiction as a form of critique). The analysis is based on a close reading of language, character, setting, and conflict.

Climate change is a hugely complex issue, spanning the scientific, the political, the economic, and the cultural. Literature has responded to the environmental crisis by looking at its impact on people, landscapes, and society. Climate fiction (cli-fi) is a genre of fiction that focuses on the human and ecological consequences of climate disruption. It is not pure science fiction, in that it is rooted in a plausible future, with the goal of making environmental predictions and the social consequences of those predictions real. Paolo Bacigalupi is an American speculative fiction writer. "The Tamarisk Hunter" is set in a dried-up American Southwest, in which Lolo's work as a tamarisk cutter provides a clear reflection of how water scarcity changes the nature of work, the nature of livelihood, and the nature of social relations.

This study's central research question asks how environmental scarcity is linked to social and economic inequality. To answer this, the study makes use of ecocriticism, political ecology, and environmental justice to

interrogate the ways in which "The Tamarisk Hunter" portrays the unequal management of resources and its resulting consequences. While there is a considerable body of work already in existence dealing with the Anthropocene, the environmental crisis, and the commodification of nature, this study is primarily concerned with the contradiction lying at the heart of the situation, whereby ecological restoration is pursued in tandem with economic dependency, such that Lolo's very survival becomes an indicator of the failure for any such restoration to be truly sustainable or just. The close reading thereof reveals that market-based solutions to environmental problems are frequently inadequate in producing either sustainable or equitable outcomes, while also showing how the very nature of the crisis is shaped by the exercise of economic and institutional power.

The analysis is informed by the theoretical frameworks provided by Glotfelty, Garrard, Nixon, and Robbins. Glotfelty's ecocriticism is used to examine how the story treats nature and the relationship between humans and the natural world. Nixon's concept of "slow violence" is relevant in terms of the insidious, gradual damage that is done to the poor. Robbins' political ecology focuses on the ways in which power and institutions control resources and determine who has to bear the environmental costs of industrial projects. These approaches inform one's efforts to read the text in terms of how it presents water scarcity as both an ecological and a socio-economic crisis, how it links resource management to class and power, and how it uses the genre of dystopia to question issues of accountability, commodification, and ownership of resources.

Environmental justice is about asking who benefits from environmental change and who bears the cost thereof. Nixon's concept of "slow violence" is particularly useful in this regard, because it helps explain why the gradual degradation of the environment disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable within society. This story is a good illustration of this idea, in that the experience of slow violence and normal hardship is very much a function of social class and position. It is only when the burden of environmental harm is distributed unequally that it becomes a political issue. The landscape in Bacigalupi's story is both a metaphor for and a consequence of environmental devastation. Under "Big Daddy Drought", the world appears as a place in which water is a commodity to be controlled, not a resource to be shared. California holds the senior legal rights to 4.4 million acre-feet from the Colorado River Basin, and the state's power is exercised via the federal agencies, such as the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec), which are in turn backed up by the state's own militarised forces. Against such insurmountable odds, the local communities simply lose out in this struggle, as the process of "evaporating" the towns is a systematic one. Water is treated as a commodity and is monetised through bounties and via infrastructure, such as "The Straw", which is a massive pipeline that sends water to California and leaves the upstream areas bone dry.

Access to water is tightly controlled by BuRec via digital surveillance. Lolo has to photograph and GPS tag every tamarisk removal in order to be credited with his work and receive his share of water. Any unauthorised use of water is met with severe penalties. In fact, if the reserves fall too low, then the well is simply blown up. Lolo works the system by reseeding tamarisk in the hope of getting future bounties. With "The Straw" pipeline completed, human labour becomes redundant, and the bounty programme is subsequently terminated, with the people being forced out and given small buyout payments. Although water is a necessity for life, in the story, it is only wealth and historic legal entitlement that determine who gets access to it. Since only the rich cities of L.A. and Vegas have their rights to the water enforced by the authorities, the towns further down the line are all destroyed. As a result of this inequality, the upstream communities (the ones living right up the river) are legally precluded from using their own water. The locals have to live by the strictest of rationing, surviving by hauling water in or by using their hidden cisterns.

Diverted river water is the very basis of California's lifestyle, but the people upstream have absolutely no say in the matter, as the water simply flows past them. Environmental value is reduced to a legal and economic proposition, with the traditional concept of property rights completely wiped out. Without water, towns become ghost towns and the people in them are reduced to "water ticks" who eke out a living through petty crime and by living in the shadows, proving that scarcity destroys solidarity in a community. Lolo keeps his tamarisk reseeding a complete secret, as he doesn't want to risk himself. The neighbours go along with the security forces in order to secure the water rights for their own families, turning on their former friends in the process. Land attachment means absolutely nothing, since it's all about who has the water. When Lolo gets his $500 buyout, he is reminded that it's all about access; it's all about survival. It doesn't matter what your claim is or what your history is, if the legal system can arbitrarily grant rights to the wealthy but deny them to the poor.

The story's dystopia is very much a reflection of actual environmental practice and consequence, the main difference being that in the story it is the structural barriers rather than the physical scarcity that are the real problem. In the "Big Daddy Drought" scenario, the environmental collapse is made worse by the priorities of the law and the

power of the state, rather than simply originating in the environment. The regional devastation is less a result of drought and more a result of California's legal entitlement to 4.4-million-acre feet from the Colorado River, which causes the upstream communities to just watch the water go by, completely unused. Federal agencies deal with the displacement of the civilian population through a series of calculated administrative procedures, drawing on the techniques of industrial liquidation to prevent any kind of social unrest from erupting. Protests over water cuts are met with force, including the destruction of water treatment plants. BuRec enforces the shortages by sealing the wells when the reserves are low. Lolo's job of cutting tamarisk is a gruelling one and is heavily monitored. He receives a very low wage and has to log his work digitally in order to get any water at all.

The restoration economy is a paradox, though, in that full ecological recovery equals unemployment and the loss of water for the workers (Lolo being a case in point). To survive, he has to reseed tamarisk in secret for the future bounty. When California finishes "The Straw" pipeline, all human labour is effectively eliminated and the bounty scheme is over. Lolo gets a non-negotiable $500 buyout. This is a very clear illustration of how rights and livelihoods can be eroded away through a series of small, incremental policy changes, rather than through one vividly dramatic disaster. This underlines the political nature of environmental management, raising questions about the issue of who controls things and who is considered disposable in the face of such management. The story is about the human impact on the environment and the deep-seated social inequalities which are inherent in the way environmental damage is both created and managed. The Anthropocene is, of course, a concept which recognises the scale of human impact on the planet, but it is a concept which can be very misleading, in that it implies that all of human beings share that impact equally. "The Tamarisk Hunter" serves as a critique of that very idea, since it shows that water scarcity is a crisis of extreme stratification, a crisis which is created and maintained by legal monopolies, state surveillance, and class exploitation. The very act of managing and engineering the environment is shown to be a mechanism of consolidating economic power. It is a process which grants the right to survive to the few but takes it away from the many.

Ecological change in "The Tamarisk Hunter" is portrayed as the result of human action, botanical management, and technical infrastructure. Drought is exacerbated by what is effectively a "botanical war" on the tamarisk, which is a massive water guzzler. Under BuRec, the environmental restoration becomes a piece-rate gig economy, with people like Lolo getting paid a pittance to go out to cut and poison the tamarisk. The piece-rate system puts labour under the microscope, with GPS photos required to prove that one's work has been done before any water can be released. Paradoxically, if Lolo and the others are successful in getting rid of the tamarisk, they lose their income. To survive, they have to secretly re-seed the tamarisk in order to get the next bounty. That is the perverse incentive created by the market mechanism. The whole system is, of course, rendered obsolete by "The Straw", which is able to pipe the river and remove the need for human labour altogether.

Bacigalupi's story is one that actively dismisses the notion that environmental destruction is a universal failing of humankind. It goes on to demonstrate how environmental degradation is, in fact, a product of power and privilege. The distribution of water is governed by a system of historical legal entitlements, which in effect favours only the coastal elites – California's senior claim to 4.4 million acre-feet of the Colorado River water being the most obvious example of this corruption. The people upstream are legally prohibited from taking their own water and are thus rendered completely powerless, as it simply flows past them. The story is about the "water ticks" (the dispossessed rural class) who are stuck in a state of mere subsistence, in stark contrast with the coastal elites who are able to maintain their lavish lifestyles thanks to the diversion of river water. When the people from the interior who have been displaced attempt to go west with the water, they are kept out by the military and armed forces, so that the elite interests can be protected.

Above all, environmental destruction in "The Tamarisk Hunter" is portrayed as the direct result of state-monopoly capitalism and bureaucratic violence. The agencies go in with the same calculatedness as the industrial liquidations of the past, carrying out regional water cut-offs with no resistance. If any resistance is encountered, it is met with force, in the form of the destruction of water treatment plants and the sealing of wells in order to drive the people out. Structural oppression comes to a head when the National Guard turns up at Lolo's house. They don't come to arrest him for subversion; they come to tell him that his labour is now redundant. "The Straw" is complete and the water bounty is cancelled. As a result, his headgate is locked and he is evicted with a $500 buyout. Individual agency is of no consequence in the face of the state's infrastructure. Likewise, "The Tamarisk Hunter" is very much a challenge to the notion that ecological crisis is a universal experience that is the same for all people. The text instead demonstrates how the crisis is mediated by capitalism and the state via legal monopolies, the exploitation of labour, and the use of violence, all of which defend the interests of the wealthy and disenfranchise the poor. The economic and political

systems determine who gets the resources and who gets left out. Climate fiction enables people to imagine the actual human cost of resource inequity and forces one to ask the hard questions about justice and survival.

When water is treated as a commodity, its value is derived from the legal monopoly and its infrastructure, not from the water itself. Under "Big Daddy Drought" California has the senior rights to 4.4-million-acre feet of the Colorado River water, which gives it enormous political clout. The Bureau of Reclamation runs a transactional water system that coerces people like Lolo to do the hard work of clearing tamarisk while getting paid peanuts to do it and having to record their work and being subject to a whole raft of other controls. Unauthorized wells are plugged and National Guard troops are stationed to protect the infrastructure and to enforce the state's control.

This is a transactional regime which treats water as a basic human need and as a commodity subject to the control of financial power. Under such conditions, the rural people are reduced to the status of "water ticks" who are left to survive on the margins, whilst the diverted water is used to support the luxuries of others from the wealthy, urban classes. Property and entitlement are meaningless, and the towns effectively become ghost towns as the population is driven out. When "The Straw" is complete and the bounty is over, Lolo is bought out and survival becomes just a matter of endurance in a system which was designed for extraction.

Control of the natural resources is therefore proven to be the same as control of the conditions of living and working. The Department of the Interior, BuRec and the state's monopoly on river flow are all the product of a militarised, techno-bureaucratic regime. Wells are capped when the water table drops, compliance is enforced through surveillance, and resistance is met with force. The regime is one which systematically dispossesses the interior of its people, whilst the coastal elite maintain their monopoly. The working-class survivors are dehumanised and rendered powerless as the resources are diverted. State water management has Lolo trapped in the precarious world of gig work, getting paid peanuts to remove tamarisk. Total restoration would kill him, so he's quietly sowing new tamarisk as a back-up. After they lose their well, they are forced to go completely illegal in their survival. This serves as a vivid case study for how environmental policy perpetuates inequality. When "The Straw" makes human labour obsolete, the bounty stops and Lolo is bought out. The point is that the entitlement belongs to the capital, not to the worker.

By presenting water shortage as a class crisis, the story mounts a challenge to the notion that environmental crises are equalisers. Lolo is reduced to the status of a "water tick" working for a pittance under the watchful eye of the company, while the elites are allowed to keep their legal entitlements to water and remain quite comfortable with the status quo. This is a case of scarcity dividing the population, since the people upstream are being starved as the water is taken away to fund the luxuries of the few. This inequality shows that "who gets the water and who doesn't" is arbitrarily determined by "who has the power and who has written the policy".

The ability to buy, litigate, or militarily seize water access is what protects the privileged from the environmental hardships, which the disempowered just can't avoid. "Vegas and L.A. put in their calls" (Bacigalupi) and the interior towns go to dust. State enforcers like Hale Perkins are part of the "Supplementary Assistance Program" to get their families California residency permits. The story presents the environmental justice picture as an image of the utterly unequal distribution of ecological risk. The disempowered rural workers are the ones who take the full brunt of it, as their municipal water treatment plants are destroyed, their private wells are filled with "Quickcrete after the water table drop[s] below the Minimum Allowable Reserve", and the river is enclosed in a concrete pipeline that leaves the canyon "bone dry". When "The Straw" makes human weed removal obsolete, the state just cancels the bounty program and liquidates Lolo's livelihood with a non-negotiable "$500 buyout check". When Lolo protests, "but this is my patch", he is told that entitlement is the property of state capital. All of these examples prove that ecological risk is systematically shifted onto the poor worker, who is left as a dispossessed refugee.

The story is also about how an environmental crisis can become self-reinforcing, if the very economic mechanisms created to deal with scarcity also serve to perpetuate dependence and inequality. The economic model at the heart of Lolo's work is one of managed scarcity. He gets $2.88 a day plus a water bounty to go out and kill the invasive tamarisk. It's a piece-rate restoration scheme, which creates a very real tension between survival and insecurity. The fact that completely eradicating the tamarisk would lead to his own personal bankruptcy is the very reason Lolo maintains a secret "insurance policy" in the form of seeding new patches of tamarisk in the remote canyons in order to prevent himself from running out of work. The point is that market-based solutions simply won't work in the face of an ecological crisis, if the underlying rights to the resource are so fundamentally unequal. California's senior claim to 4.4-million-acre feet of water is effectively starving the upstream communities. Although "Big Daddy Drought" serves as the physical constraint, it is the human-made economic system which determines the social consequences of that scarcity. The bureaucracy

systematically evaporates the interior towns. When the technological efficiency of "The Straw" pipeline renders human labour redundant, the authorities just walk away and end the bounty with a one-way "buyout" of $500. This is the ultimate expression of market logic in action: an environmental crisis becomes a crisis of class dispossession.

Lolo's labour is a case in point of the environmental crisis being not just one of degraded landscape but of unstable employment and a total lack of options in life. He is a piece-rate restoration worker for the Bureau of Reclamation, earning "2.88 a day plus water bounty" to go out and kill the water-guzzling tamarisk. He is forced to accept a life of physical grind and economic vulnerability, with the landscape itself being in a state of degradation. He has to hike down into the canyons to do the work, carrying "jugs of tamarisk poison" while his own well is full of "Quickcrete" from the state. To survive, he must compete against the other workers by doing a bit of subversive sabotage and by "seeding new patches of tamarisk" in order to have a future crop to hunt. Despite his efforts, he remains completely at the mercy of the system; his helplessness is put on display when California finishes "The Straw" pipeline the state just unilaterally ends the bounty and liquidates his home with a "500 buyout check" which he can't negotiate. This is the essence of climate precarity, as the environmental breakdown and the state's hoarding of resources leave the dispossessed worker with no other options except to become a parasitic "water tick" and migrate to some new location.

The tamarisk serves as the very embodiment of the conflict between the complexity of the natural world and the human desire to control that world in the interests of the economy. It lies at the very heart of the ecological conflict, commodified labour, and the utilitarian approach to nature. It is presented as the ultimate water guzzler (a "big tamarisk can suck 73,000 gallons of river water a year") and the Bureau of Reclamation is out in full force to get rid of it on a piece rate basis of "$2.88 a day plus water bounty". This is a paradox in itself, as the complete eradication of the tamarisk would result in the worker going personally bankrupt, forcing Lolo to be in the position of having to "seed new patches of tamarisk" as an "insurance policy" against the threat of working himself out of the job. The tree is the symbol of a system in which nature is considered to have value only insofar as it is seen as a threat to or a form of utility for human interests. Lolo's question "why should one of those damn plants get the water?" captures the very essence of this dilemma.

Bacigalupi complicates the issue of environmental morality by showing how people can become participants in destructive systems, simply because their very existence is predicated on those systems. Lolo's struggle to survive in the face of the "Big Daddy Drought" creates a very real moral dilemma. In order to protect his piece rate-water bounty, he is forced to perform an act of ecological waste by secretly planting invasive tamarisk trees. This situation proves that there is no easy moral solution presented; instead, the text simply presents the reader with a series of difficult moral choices. This shows that in the face of systemic dispossession and the imposition of a piece-rate work system, people simply can't choose to be environmentalists. When one's "water ticks" are in such a position, one can't afford to be concerned about saving nature.

The language of the story is very much the language of the environmental crisis as it is understood through the competing vocabularies of ecology, economics, and survival. "Big Daddy Drought" takes the reality of the environment and turns it into the language of management. The sheer physical effort of the task is described in terms of vegetation as a hydrological consumer: Lolo is "boot-skiing a gully" and carrying "tamarisk poison" and the tamarisk is described as a "big tamarisk that can suck 73,000 gallons of river water a year". The reality is made very tangible through the use of hard facts and figures (California's legal entitlement of "4.4 million acre-feet", a piece rate of "2.88 a day"). In the end, it all comes down to the language of resource management, as ecology is reduced to a series of costs and outputs, with disproportionate focus on "seep and evaporation control" and the simple calculation of "how many cities, how many people they could evaporate".

The ending makes absolutely no moral sense whatsoever, as it simply shows the state infrastructure smothering the individual. Lolo's subversive reseeding is completely irrelevant when California goes ahead and completes "The Straw" pipeline (which removes the need for any human labour at all) and liquidates his patch with a non-negotiable $500 buyout cheque. When Lolo protests, "but this is my patch", Hale just responds by telling him that entitlement is only for state capital under "Big Daddy Drought". In the end, Lolo is presented as a dispossessed refugee, with the river flowing away to California. The state infrastructure has won, proving through a case of market-based environmental management that in the face of such extreme power imbalances, the working-class labourer will always end up being commodified, exploited, and discarded.

"The Tamarisk Hunter" shows that the effects of climate change cannot be separated from the economic and political systems, which regulate the distribution of natural resources. In "The Tamarisk Hunter", water scarcity is both an ecological drought and a socio-economic crisis in which California's legal water monopoly dispossesses the people

upstream. Lolo's piece-rate tamarisk clearing is a textbook example of market-based environmental management leading to a very precarious mode of existence, in which the workers are forced to participate in subversive reseeding just to avoid starvation. The short story is read through the lens of ecocriticism, political ecology, and environmental justice to show the commodification of both nature and the labourers, the use of state power to dispossess through control of resources, and the ways in which the risk of ecological damage is borne by the poor. Climate fiction is vital, in that it makes the abstract reality of environmental data real by allowing the reader to see the human cost of the systems of resource management. This is most vividly put on display in the image of Lolo removing tamarisk trees in order to survive, as his very livelihood is based on the very activity which this piece is supposed to be eradicating. That contradiction is what allows the reader to interrogate the ways in which market incentives can work against the very environmental objectives they are designed to achieve.

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