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Submerged Cities and Deserted Futures: Environmental Catastrophe, Resistance, and Inequality in *New York 2140* and *Gold Fame Citrus*

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Abstract

Climate change narratives in contemporary literature serve as powerful tools for exploring potential futures shaped by environmental catastrophes. Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* are two seminal works in this genre, presenting starkly different yet complementary visions of a world transformed by climate change. Robinson's novel imagines a New York City submerged by rising sea levels, while Watkins' story unfolds in a California-turned desert by extreme drought. This paper compares and contrasts these two novels, focusing on their depictions of environmental catastrophe, human resistance, and social inequality. By examining each work's distinct settings, character developments, and thematic concerns, this study will illuminate the diverse ways speculative fiction addresses the urgent issues of climate change and social justice.

Key Words: Climate Change, resilience, adaptation.

Among the most pressing and intricate issues confronting the contemporary world is climate change. It describes the long-term alteration in earth's climate, weather and ecosystems that are mostly brought about by human activities like burning fossil fuel, industrialization, deforestation and so on. Global Warming and extreme weather events such as drought, flood, heat waves and sea level rise are the consequences of these actions which have certainly increased the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. In addition

to endangering the environment, climate change has an impact on human life, agriculture, economics and health all over the world. It has created serious ethical, moral and social issues of accountability and survival. Scientists have warned that this irreversible damage may result if quick action is not taken to cut emissions and safeguard natural sources. As a result, thinkers, artists, and writers have begun to respond to this global crisis through their literary works. Climate fiction examines how humans might live, adapt or perish transformed by

environmental calamity. Climate fiction fosters introspection and action for a more sustainable future by informing and educating readers about the emotional, moral and social aspects of climate change through imagination and storytelling.

Many critics now a days are writing about this climate issue and presenting their deeper insights on it. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, Climate changes compel us to rethink human history because Humans are now a “geological force” that changes the earth itself. Ursula K.Heise in her very famous book *Imagining Extinction* (2016) says that stories about environmental collapse help societies comprehend the emotional significance of losing nature. Rosi Braidotti’s *Posthumanism* is another very significant name to understand this issue in detail. She says that people should not consider themselves separate from nature instead they should acknowledge their deep interconnectedness with all the living being on the earth. These critical perspectives help us to know how climate change fiction challenges anthropocentric thinking and call new form of ecological thinking and awareness. In a age of ecological disaster, such narratives encourage reader to look beyond human despair and think about the possibilities of co-existence, adaptation and renewal by blending imagination with scientific and ethical reflection.

Climate change narratives in contemporary literature serve as powerful tools for exploring potential futures shaped by environmental catastrophe. The concern and effects of climate change have been explored through the literature by authors across the worldwide. For instance, Margaret Atwood in her seminal work *MAddAddam* trilogy imagine a world ruined by ecological collapse, biotechnology and human avarice. *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh is another example to note. These narratives show how environmental degradation can lead to moral and social decay

compelling humans to confront their won part in shaping the future of the globe.

Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* and Claire Vaye Watkins’ *Gold Fame Citrus* are two seminal works in this genre, presenting starkly different yet complementary visions of a world transformed by climate change. Robinson’s novel imagines a New York City submerged by rising sea levels, while Watkins’ story unfolds in a California turned desert by extreme drought. This paper is an attempt to compare and contrast these two novels, focusing on their depictions of environmental catastrophe, human resistance, and social inequality. By examining each work’s distinct settings, character developments, and thematic concerns, this study will illuminate the diverse ways in which speculative fiction addresses the urgent issues of climate change and social justice.

The settings in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* and Claire Vaye Watkins’ *Gold Fame Citrus* are highly effective in conveying the profound impact of climate change. Robinson’s portrayal of a future New York City submerged by rising sea levels presents a powerful image of urban adaptation and resilience. The skyscrapers rising from the water like islands and the transformation of streets into canals create a vivid, immersive environment that underscores the enormity of the climate crisis. This flooded metropolis not only highlights the physical alterations to a familiar cityscape but also symbolizes the broader disruption of societal norms and economic structures. The adaptation of buildings into intertidal zones and the creation of floating gardens exemplify human ingenuity in the face of environmental challenges, while also emphasizing the persistent threats and inequalities exacerbated by such a drastic change.

In contrast, Watkins’ depiction of a California turned into a desert wasteland by extreme drought offers a starkly different yet equally compelling vision of climate

catastrophe. The vast, shifting dunes of the Amargosa Dune Sea and the desiccated landscapes convey a sense of relentless, unforgiving nature. As Watkins describes, "Out here, the sun blazed mercilessly, turning the ground to a cracked and barren wasteland. The dunes of the Amargosa shifted like a living thing, swallowing entire towns and leaving behind only whispers of what once was. Water was the most precious currency, more valuable than gold or fame, and each drop was a miracle" (Watkins 147). This setting effectively illustrates the theme of scarcity, with water becoming a precious and rare commodity. The barren cracked earth and the parched vegetation serve as powerful symbols of desolation and the harsh realities of a world without adequate water resources. This environmental imagery not only paints a vivid picture of the immediate impacts of climate change but also delves into the deeper psychological and societal consequences, highlighting the desperation and drastic measures that individuals must take to survive.

Both settings are meticulously crafted to evoke strong emotional responses and provoke thoughtful reflection on the current and future impacts of climate change. By transforming familiar landscapes into extreme environments, Robinson and Watkins effectively convey the urgency and severity of the climate crisis, making their novels poignant and impactful commentaries on the consequences of human actions on the environment.

In *New York 2140* by Kim Stanley Robinson and *Gold Fame Citrus* by Claire Vaye Watkins, characters exhibit remarkable adaptability to their challenging environments, showcasing human resilience and ingenuity in the face of climate-induced adversities. In *New York 2140* the residents of the submerged New York City demonstrate adaptation through technological and communal innovations. Characters like Franklin Garr and Charlotte Armstrong navigate the flooded urban landscape by transforming submerged skyscrapers into habitable spaces and

developing floating gardens to sustain themselves. These adaptations reflect a collective effort to maintain a semblance of normalcy and community despite the drastic changes to their environment. The novel emphasizes cooperation and resourcefulness, highlighting how urban dwellers reimagine their surroundings to create sustainable living conditions amidst the encroaching waters.

Conversely, in *Gold Fame Citrus* characters face the arid, desolate expanse of a drought-stricken California, where water scarcity dictates every aspect of life. Luz and Ray, the protagonists, initially struggle to survive in the harsh desert landscape, relying on scarce water supplies and scavenging for resources. Their journey through the Amargosa Dune Sea leads them to Levi Zabriskie's utopian community, which promises refuge but reveals underlying manipulative control. The characters' adaptability is driven by desperation and the constant search for water, reflecting a more individualistic and survivalist approach. The novel portrays a grimmer perspective on adaptation, where the characters' resilience is marked by a continuous battle against the merciless environment and the uncertainty of utopian promises.

Together, these novels illustrate different facets of human adaptability: one rooted in communal innovation and cooperation, and the other in individual survival and the quest for scarce resources. Despite the contrasting settings—a waterlogged city and a parched desert—both narratives underscore the relentless human spirit to endure and adapt in the face of overwhelming environmental challenges.

Both *New York 2140* by Kim Stanley Robinson and *Gold Fame Citrus* by Claire Vaye Watkins address social disparities and the quest for justice, albeit in different ways. In *New York 2140* Robinson highlights the deepening economic inequality exacerbated by climate change. The novel portrays a stark divide

between the wealthy, who can afford to live in the upper floors of skyscrapers and continue their lives with relative comfort, and the poor, who are left to navigate the flooded lower levels and struggle for survival. "The rich get richer, and the poor get water wings." (Robinson 100) Characters like Charlotte Armstrong engage in activism, advocating for social justice and fighting against the exploitative practices of the rich, such as Franklin Garr's speculative investment schemes. The novel emphasizes the importance of community organizing and collective action to address systemic inequalities and push for equitable solutions in the face of environmental crises.

In contrast, *Gold Fame Citrus* by Claire Vaye Watkins delves into the social disparities through the lens of extreme scarcity and survival. The drought-stricken setting of California amplifies the inequalities, with water becoming a precious commodity controlled by the powerful. The novel's characters, Luz and Ray, initially struggle on the fringes of society, highlighting the desperation and vulnerability of those without access to essential resources. The introduction of Levi Zabriskie's utopian community presents a façade of equality and justice, but it soon reveals underlying manipulation and control, questioning the authenticity of such ideals in desperate times. Watkins explores the theme of social disparity by illustrating how environmental degradation can lead to the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a few, leaving the majority to fend for themselves.

Both novels use their dystopian settings to critique existing social structures and highlight the exacerbation of inequalities due to environmental catastrophes. Through their narratives, Robinson and Watkins underscore the necessity of addressing social justice alongside environmental sustainability, illustrating how the fight for equity becomes even more crucial in times of crisis.

The use of environmental imagery in *New York 2140* by Kim Stanley Robinson and *Gold Fame Citrus* by Claire Vaye Watkins is central to conveying the impact of climate change and shaping the narrative landscapes of their respective dystopian worlds.

In *New York 2140* Robinson employs vivid aquatic imagery to depict a future New York City transformed by rising sea levels. The cityscape is reimagined as a network of canals and submerged skyscrapers, creating a "super-Venice" where familiar landmarks are partially underwater. The imagery of buildings rising like islands from the water, streets turned into waterways, and floating gardens provides a stark visual representation of the environmental catastrophe. This transformation not only illustrates the physical consequences of climate change but also evokes a sense of loss and adaptation. "The lower floors were submerged, converted into aquariums or sealed off entirely, while the upper floors bustled with life and commerce" (Robinson 78). The descriptions of the intertidal architecture, with its sealed lower floors and bustling upper levels, highlight human ingenuity and resilience in the face of environmental challenges. The floating gardens and aquaculture systems are symbols of sustainability and hope amidst the submerged urban chaos.

Conversely, *Gold Fame Citrus* uses stark desert imagery to depict a California ravaged by extreme drought. Watkins paints a desolate and arid landscape dominated by the vast, shifting Amargosa Dune Sea. The barren cracked earth and parched vegetation create a sense of relentless, unforgiving nature. This harsh environment is vividly described through scenes of sun-baked earth and the constant struggle for water. The imagery of the dunes, described as "alive, moving with a life force of their own," underscores the dynamic and perilous nature of the setting. This relentless desert serves as a backdrop for exploring themes of scarcity, survival, and the psychological toll of environmental degradation. The depiction of

water as a rare and precious resource, gleaming like jewels in the harsh sunlight, emphasizes its value and the desperation it engenders.

Both novels use their respective environmental imagery to powerful effect, creating immersive and evocative settings that drive home the urgent realities of climate change. Robinson's aquatic world and Watkins' desert wasteland are not merely backdrops but integral to the narratives, influencing character behaviour, societal structures, and thematic explorations. The imagery in *New York 2140* highlights the potential for adaptation and community resilience, while the imagery in *Gold Fame Citrus* underscores the harshness of scarcity and the extreme measures required for survival. Together, these works offer compelling visions of the future, using environmental imagery to engage readers with the pressing issue of climate change and its multifaceted impacts on human life.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* employ distinct narrative techniques and styles to convey the profound impacts of climate change on society. Robinson's novel uses multiple perspectives to weave together the lives of diverse characters in a submerged New York City, creating a polyphonic narrative that offers a comprehensive exploration of urban adaptation and social inequality. His detailed world-building, filled with vivid aquatic imagery like the city's skyscrapers rising like islands from the water, immerses readers in the transformed metropolis, "New York was always a city that floated on the world's seas, but now the sea had come to New York" (Robinson 5). This meticulous description is coupled with real-world data and speculative technology, grounding the story in plausible reality and enhancing its socio-political commentary on issues like economic disparity and corporate greed.

In contrast, Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* features lyrical, almost poetic prose to depict a

drought-stricken California turned into a vast desert. Her fragmented narrative structure and deep psychological insights into her characters create a sense of disjointed reality, mirroring the instability of their environment. The stark desert imagery, such as the "endless dunes of the Amargosa Dune Sea" (Watkins 32) vividly captures the harshness and desolation of the setting. Watkins explores the tension between utopian ideals and dystopian realities through the depiction of Levi Zabriskie's commune, initially appearing as a refuge but revealing darker undertones of control, "He said it was a utopia. But it was more like a dream turned sour" (Watkins 214). Together, these novels use their unique narrative techniques and styles to explore the urgent themes of climate change, human resilience, and social justice, offering complementary yet distinct visions of dystopian futures.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* are significant contributions to the genre of climate fiction, providing compelling narratives that can raise awareness and inspire action on climate change in society. Through their immersive storytelling, these novels highlight the severe consequences of environmental degradation and the urgent need for collective and individual action.

Robinson's *New York 2140* vividly illustrates a future where rising sea levels have transformed New York City into a "super-Venice" with characters navigating a world where the impacts of climate change are an everyday reality. The novel's multi-perspective approach allows readers to see the varied ways different social strata are affected by and respond to this new world. By blending speculative fiction with real-world data and scientific principles, Robinson not only creates a believable and immersive narrative but also educates readers about the potential future scenarios and the importance of proactive environmental policies. His detailed exploration of economic inequality, social justice, and

community resilience serves as a powerful commentary on the need for systemic change to address climate challenges. For example, the cooperative efforts of the city's residents to push for more equitable solutions and fight against corporate greed highlight the potential for grassroots activism to effect meaningful change.

Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* presents a starkly different but equally powerful vision of a world altered by climate change. Set in a California turned into a desert by extreme drought, the novel uses its dystopian setting to explore themes of scarcity, survival, and the psychological toll of environmental collapse. Through the journeys of its characters, Watkins underscores the desperation and vulnerability that come with environmental degradation. The novel's portrayal of Levi Zabriskie's commune, initially promising utopian refuge but later revealing darker manipulative practices, critiques the notion of quick fixes and underscores the complexity of achieving true sustainability and social justice. These narrative challenges readers to think critically about the authenticity of solutions offered in response to climate crises and the importance of maintaining ethical considerations even in desperate times.

Both novels serve as cautionary tales that can provoke thought and inspire action among readers. By presenting plausible, emotionally engaging futures shaped by climate change, Robinson and Watkins compel readers to reflect on the current trajectory of environmental policies and personal behaviours. Their narratives can help foster a greater sense of urgency and responsibility, encouraging individuals and communities to advocate for sustainable practices and more robust climate action. In this way, *New York 2140* and *Gold Fame Citrus* not only contribute to the growing body of climate fiction but also have the potential to influence societal attitudes and drive meaningful change towards a more sustainable future.

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