

# The Dry Future in *The Water Knife*

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## Abstract:

This paper attempts to develop the critique of Paolo Bacigalupi's 2015 novel *The Water Knife* as the warning for a dry future. It depicts the worst case scenario of near future; a postmodern society, chaos, a world which moves from disaster to horror. Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* is a noir-filled, apocalyptic vision of a dreadful near future. A future where there is a dystopian Dust Bowl, a similar dust storm and drought as Oklahoma had in 1930s and people are dying due to scarcity of water. Bacigalupi already seems to have lived in the future, presenting the very postmodern world where water is more precious than gold. *The Water Knife* is set in near-future United States, where the south-western states compete with each other for access to a reliable water supply during a period of prolonged and disastrous drought. Water is the only concern in *The Water Knife*, where the people are dying and fighting for water.

**Key words:** Apocalypse, Drought, Dystopia, Water-war.

Paolo Bacigalupi always seems concerned about the environment so he presents to us a post-apocalyptic future which can be real if humans don't check their attitude towards the natural resources like water. Bacigalupi takes his readers to a place where it seems that the world may head to a post-water time very soon in near future. The central motif of the novel is water and drought and all of the action in the narrative is motivated by the desire of different characters to secure a regular water supply for themselves or others. The story revolves round three characters: Lucy, a journalist living in Phoenix; Maria, an evacuated Texan refugee now living in Phoenix with her friend Sarah; and Angle, the 'water knife'. *The Water Knife* takes place at time in a near-future United States when it is a period of extended and disastrous drought resulting into the water-wars between the south-western states in order to get the access to reliable water supply. Paolo Bacigalupi calls this prolonged and dreadful draught as "Big Daddy Drought" (22). People have not seen rain since long time and they even hear the sounds of rain hitting their windows and dream about the rain. The draught ridden landscape has dried people's minds as well. For them rain is a blessing they are eagerly waiting for, as is visible in the lines below:

Lucy woke to the sound of rain. A benediction, gently pattering. For the first time in more than a year, her body relaxed. The release of tension was so sudden that for a moment she felt as if she were filled with helium. Weightless. All her sadness and horror sloughed off her frame like the skin of a snake, too confining and gritted and dry to contain her any longer, and she was rising. She was new and clean and lighter than air, and she sobbed with the release of it. And then she woke fully, and it wasn't rain caressing the windows of her home but dust, and the weight of her life came crushing down upon her once again. (21)

The rain was an unfulfilled dream, the dream the people as well as the land were dreaming of. This dream seemed so real to Lucy that she could imagine all its blessings. It was like a benediction for her, "the dream had seemed so 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 gift – the land and her body, absorbing the miracle of water that fell from the sky" (21). It was after more than a year that her body relaxed hearing the sound of rain. For a moment she felt weightless as if her body was filled with helium. All her sadness got off hearing the sound of rain. But the dream was soon shattered as she got to know that it was not rain hitting the window but the dust,

Water that fell of its own volition, right out of the sky.

In Lucy's dream it had been as gentle as a kiss. Blessing and absolution, cascading from the heavens. And now it was gone. Her lips were cracked and broken. (21)

The "Big Daddy Drought" can be compared to the Dust Bowl of Okies, which was slaying all the life in that part of the world, "the storm was thickening ... the streetlights collapsing into blackness ... Lucy went back to bed ... listening as the wind whipped the night. Somewhere outside, a dog was howling for safety. A stray may be. It would be dead in the morning, another victim of Big Daddy Drought" (22).

The disaster has hit the city, very ferocious dust storms. Taking houses away or destroying them, "ripping pipes and wires out of the walls, like popping the bones out of a corpse ... pried out windows like scooping eyeballs, leaving the house staring blindly across the street at equally eyeless homes" (27). The storms were continuous, one after another breaking Lucy apart, yet she was hopeful that "It'll pass" ((27). Little later she got worried about the unstoppable storms. Even the meteorological department was not sure as to when the storms would stop:

The weather people were saying that they might set a record for dust storms. Sixty-five recorded so far, and more on the way. But what if there were no limit to the storms?

Meteorologists all talked as if there could be records – and record-breakers. (27)

The story revolves around three central characters Angel, Lucy, and Maria. Angel Velasquez is the “water knife” of the novel’s title. He worked as an undercover agent for the state of Nevada, infiltrating and disrupting the water supplies of rival states. At the start of the novel, Angel had been sent to Phoenix, Arizona, by his boss Catherine Case to investigate some mysterious incidents in the city. The states are fighting for water rights. The people are being killed and dying of thirst. As Bacigalupi puts it on the back cover:

As bodies begin to pile up and bullets start flying, the three find themselves pawns in a game far bigger, more corrupt, and dirtier than any of them could have imagined. With Phoenix teetering on the verge of collapse and time running out for Angel, Lucy, and Maria, their only hope for survival rests in one another's hands. But when water is more valuable than gold, alliances shift like sand, and the only truth in the desert is that someone will have to bleed if anyone hopes to drink.

People in the Phoenix were dying due to scarcity of water, the drought and the dust storm. The Red Cross dug water pump “Friendship pump” and water was sold at very high rates, ten to twenty dollars a litre and “the blocks round the Friendship pump were an oasis life and activity in the drought savaged wilderness of the Phoenix suburbs” (39). The Phoenix government had not done anything to get people out of this situation. The only thing they had was these Red Cross pumps with prices of water touching the sky. “Those pumps and those prices are probably the only smart thing Phoenix has done for the water” ... “Too little too late, but you know better late than never” (43).

Not all the people were dying of drought. There were some people who still used water as someone sitting beside a river will do. For them water was like ornaments or a kind of luxury which was kept by these wealthiest and most successful people in this world, and the sight of such a waste of resources was very impossible to imagine. As Maria and Sarah get awestruck to see water being wasted by their favourite actor Tau Ox when the people are dying of drought:

The camera had been following Tau Ox, but Maria had lost interest in the star when she saw the fountain.

Huge-ass fountain, spraying water straight up into the air. Dancing water spouts. Water like diamonds in the sun. and little kids splashing their faces with it. Just wasting it ... and it was *outside*. They were just letting water evaporate. Letting it go. (42)

Only the hydrologists “saw the world clear” for rest of the world it was cloudy. The common man was not able to understand the results and the ways to come out of this drought. They were wondering what is happening to their world? Where the water has gone? Where the rains are? From where will they fulfil their water needs? A typical postmodern chaos is seen. Maria along with her friend Sarah then meet a hydrologist, Michael Ratan who knew the world better:

Michael Ratan – senior hydrology specialist, Ibs Ltd. – lived high up in the Taiyang Arcology and understood what was happening with the world. He spoke a language of acre-feet of water, spring runoff in CFS, and snowpack depths. He spoke of rivers and underground water. And because he saw the world true and accepted it, instead of living in denial, he was never blindsided. (44)

While the south-western United States is fighting for water rights of Colorado River, the Chinese are investing profoundly to build arcologies in Las Vegas and Phoenix. An arcology is a self-sufficient living environment created by man that recycles 95% of the water. Not only the water is recycled; but almost everything needed to survive is recycled. Therefore, an arcology can be climate controlled, crops can be grown, the air can be filtered and kept clean and safe from the repeated dust storms outside, people living inside can then pretend like life is normal. These arcologies are built by the poor and distressed who never make enough money from their work to live inside them. The wealthy and powerful people of the society get to live in these arcologies full of comfort and safety. As we saw in the above quotation that the senior hydrologist knowing the disastrous condition in the Phoenix lives safely in an arcology.

As the hydrologists like Ratan knew all about the ways to get water in these drought prone areas, “he told Maria how the Earth held hundreds of millions of gallons of water deep underground. Ancient water that seeped down into it when glaciers melted” (44). The ground water and other reliable sources which the common man like Maria could never know otherwise. That is how the people like Ratan and Tau Ox were using water like they own a river. The problems in near future were also faced by the common man and rich enjoy the luxury of water even in disaster hit states. Now from Ratan Maria got to know about a whole new world down under:

He’d described this world to Maria, hands darting, outlining geological strata, sandstone formations, talking about Halliburton drill soundings, telling her about aquifers.

Aquifers.

Whole huge underground lakes. (44)

As the Red Cross is digging pumps, Ratan told Maria that these lakes of underground water “were almost pumped dry by now” there was a “vast amounts of water down there ... but if you drill deep enough and frack right, you can open things up. Water will perc okay. ... At least in most places there’s still an aquifer or two you can crack open and get a little water flowing” (44).

He then told her about The Central Arizona Project (CAP), through which they are bringing water from an artificial lake, Lake Havasu, filled by the Colorado River, the only source of water for them as all other sources are either dying due to draught or are seasonal:

“The CAP is Arizona’s IV drip”. Ratan explained. “It pumps water up out of the Colorado River and brings it three hundred miles across the desert to Phoenix. Almost everything else that Phoenix depends on for water is done for. Roosevelt Reservoir is about dried up. The Verde and salt Rivers are practically seasonal. The aquifers around here are all pumped to hell. But Phoenix still has a pulse because of the CAP”. (45)

The Colorado River is like the river of life for the people of Phoenix and other states. And this river is the reason for the water-wars in the novel between the states like Arizona, California and Nevada. As Ratan tells Maria about the fight over the water rights of Colorado River:

A river that a lot of other people want to use, too. California pumps out of Lake Havasu, too. And Catherine Case up there in Nevada doesn’t like letting water down into Havasu at all because she needs it up in Lake Mead. ... “That’s a lot of people fighting over too little water. And that’s a mighty vulnerable line. Someone bombed the CAP once, almost knocked Phoenix off.” (45)

For Bacigalupi a water knife is the one who does the filthy work for the people in charge of the water, the one who does what has to be done whether that is killing someone or blowing up an entire water processing facility. Angel is a water knife working for Catherine Case, the most powerful person in Nevada. She is the person to decide about the water and the existence of the state of Nevada, Las Vegas in particular, depends on her. As Bacigalupi puts it about Angel in the description of the book on his website: “Angel Velasquez, detective, leg-breaker, assassin and spy. A Las Vegas water knife Angel “cuts” water for his boss, Catherine Case, ensuring that her lush, luxurious arcology developments can bloom in the desert, so the rich can stay wet, while the poor get nothing but dust.” The people like “Queen of Colorado”, Catherine Case and Michael Ratan live in arcologies above the dust storm enjoying all the water for them and the common man suffered of thirst and shower was a dream for them as they lay in dust as:

Behind the billboard the Taiyang Arcology rose, banks of glass offices and the bright lights of full-spectrum grow lamps blazing over its vertical farm sections. None of the lights in the Taiyang flickered. The people who live and worked in there might not even know the storm was brewing. Cool and comfortable behind their air filters, with their A/C and water recycling, they might not even care that the world was falling apart outside their windows. (347)

Lucy, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, finally gets to know that her friend Jamie had been murdered after he became involved in a scheme to sell water rights of the Colorado River, she was afraid of being the next target of Jamie’s killers. Angel Velasquez arrived in Phoenix he met up with his colleague Julio who explained that one of his contacts in the Phoenix Water Board had been brutally murdered. The two men went to the morgue where they met journalist Lucy Monroe who was investigating the death of someone who had been tortured in a similar way to Julio’s colleague. Angel felt a powerful connection with Lucy which motivated him to let her leave even though she might have had information that he needed.

The story now gets into a life and death race to see who can get the documents first. Angel is on the hunt and so is everyone else in the novel. Lucy has been living in Phoenix for a number of years documenting its decline gets mixed up in all of it as she investigates who killed her friend Jamie, the guy who had originally found the water rights. Lucy had by now discovered that her friend Jamie had been doing business with a man named Michael Ratan, who lived in a luxurious apartment building called the Taiyang Arcology in Phoenix. Maria and Sarah decide to have sex with Ratan so that they can get money from him and pay the rent of the apartment they are living in. she also gets mixed up in the water issue. As the morning after the girls slept with Ratan, Maria dreamt about Sarah’s death who dies in reality after two men broke into Ratan’s apartment, killing Ratan and Sarah over the water rights. Maria had already stolen the document in the book kept hidden under the bed. The journalist Lucy came to the apartment while the men were still there and they kidnapped her. Angel arrived and interrogated Maria about what had happened there. Angel let Maria keep a book that she had found in Ratan’s apartment. Following clues given to him by Maria, Angel realized that his colleague Julio was double-crossing him and had kidnapped Lucy. Angel tracked him down and saved Lucy from being tortured. Angel and Lucy shared what they knew about the water rights Jamie and Michael Ratan had been trying to sell. Lucy and Angel hid together in a Phoenix slum, during which time a sexual/romantic relationship began between the pair.

Lucy continued trying to investigate the mysterious water rights but was intercepted by agents from California who threatened to kill Lucy's sister Anna and her children if Lucy didn't agree to betray Angel and turn him over to California. Lucy led Angel into an ambush at a gas station, but he escaped. A group of disgruntled and mistreated Texan refugees became involved in the fight, having mistaken Lucy and Angel for fellow Texans, leading to a fire which quickly spread across the whole of Phoenix. Using the Texans and the fire as cover from the Californians, Lucy tracked down the wounded Angel and saved his life. Angel realized that his boss Catherine Case had ordered his murder because she mistakenly believed he had stolen the water rights. Case agreed that she would let Angel live if he found the rights and brought them to Nevada. Angel realized that the rights were tucked inside the book that Maria had taken from Ratan's apartment.

Angel and Lucy found Maria in Carver City, where she was trying to cross the state border. Maria needed to escape Arizona because The Vet was going to kill her after she failed to pay him the money she owed. Angel told Maria that if she gave him the water rights he would take her to live in Las Vegas, where she would be safe. When Lucy read the water rights she realized that they could save Phoenix from being destroyed, so she decided to take the documents back to Arizona despite the suffering this would cause for Angel. Unwilling to lose her one chance to escape Arizona, Maria shot Lucy, allowing Angel to regain possession of the water rights. Maria sat on the riverbank listening to helicopters approaching which would take all three of them to Nevada.

The story is a typical postmodern discourse, a world where disaster leads to horror. The disaster of Big Daddy Drought and dust storms leading to noir tinged murder mystery. The postmodern traits like noir, paranoia, minimalism etc. are very apparent. Historiographic Metafiction and fiction are there as well, as the fact of water scarcity and drought in south-western United States is a reality mixed into fiction very well by Bacigalupi raising the very issue of water management in the wrecked world. Then participation, Bacigalupi puts reader into question many times in the narrative to speculate what would have happened as is seen in the ending of the novel when Angel, Maria and Lucy are there when helicopters came. It is left upto the readers to decide that what would have happened later, what will they do with the documents of water rights, will they give those to Catherine Chase or Lucy will take the papers to save Phoenix, all is a mystery to be solved by reader.

"Amid a real draught, thriller 'Water Knife' cuts to the quick" (2015), an article written by Denise Hamilton in *Los Angeles Times* makes a clear analysis of the postmodern traits in *The Water Knife*:

"The Water Knife" brings to mind the movie Chinatown. Although one is set in the past and the other in a dystopian future, both are neo-noir tales with jaded antiheroes and ruthless kingpins who wield water as lethal weapons to control life—and mete out death. . . . Bacigalupi weaves page-turning action with zeitgeisty themes. ... His use of water as sacred currency evokes Frank Herbert's *Dune*. Like the best sci-fi, "The Water Knife" has its own vocabulary and rituals but is rooted in a familiar world. There are REI dust goggles, the Kindle Post and hashtags. The book's nervous energy recalls William Gibson at his cyberpunk best. Its visual imagery evokes Dust Bowl Okies in the Great Depression and the catastrophic 1928 failure of the St. Francis Dam that killed 600 people and haunted its builder, Mulholland, into the grave. ... I shivered, hoping that Bacigalupi's vision of the future won't be ours.

Lucy wonders about the future. She visualises about future archaeologists looking at her time, then leaps ahead thinking about the future generation as well:

*Maybe that's what the archaeologists will call us. The Outdoor Period. For when people still lived indoors.*

Maybe in a thousand years everyone would be living underground or in arcologies, with only their greenhouses touching the surface, all their moisture carefully collected and held. Maybe in a thousand years humanity would become a burrowing species, safely tucked underground for survival. (349)

While replying to a question by Okiegirl22 about inspiration of his drought story on reddit.com (2016) Paolo replies,

I also live in a water scarce area, so I grew up with a certain awareness of vulnerability. Where I live in Western Colorado we can see the snow on the mountains, and see it melting in the spring, flowing into our reservoirs, and then see it channelled through irrigation systems to our fields. And in a drought, we see our reservoirs go low, and other people with higher rights make calls on our water, and we go dry in July. So drought has always been in my mind I think.

**Conclusion:** Paolo Bacigalupi in *The Water Knife* has portrayed very dismal picture of postmodern dystopian future where the disaster is related to water and horror is man-made. Paolo Bacigalupi through his work is indirectly warning the society about the world to come if what might happen if the US does not address global climate change and its own water-wasting ways. He predicts a thirsty future for south-western United States with a powerful environmental message. The world in *The Water Knife* is not far away; as it arrives just weeks after Governor Jerry Brown declared that California was facing the worst drought emergency in memory. Residents in the south-western United States enduring that water crisis will appreciate the precision with which Bacigalupi imagines the thirsty future. The politicians and their private armies fight one another using drones, attack helicopters

and lawyers to take control of the precious life-giving liquid still flowing, fitfully, from the Colorado River. The residents of Las Vegas, Phoenix and other Western cities cling to life, dreaming of rain that never comes. A gallon of water costs more than a gallon of gasoline does today. So, the world must take Bacigalupi's work serious and stop wasting water and take proper measures for water management otherwise the dry future depicted in *The Water Knife* would not be far away.

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