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The Power of Climate Narratives: Despair, Hope and Resilience in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Fifty Degrees Below*

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Climate crises have become an unavoidable dominating element in the present, the climate is changing and the exact degree to which it will change is unpredictable. Climate change is responsible for the extreme weather conditions like flooding, desertification and sea level rise. To emphasise on the severity of climate change and the consequences of it a new genre of literature termed Climate Fiction addresses the concerns of climate change on a global scale. In a growing dystopian world where climate change is the norm, climate fiction through works of art and literature addresses pressing environmental concerns to reach wider audience. Cli-fi novels and films are set in future and narrate the story of disaster and its effect on humans. To raise awareness documentaries like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Before The Flood*, movies like *Day After Tomorrow*, *Kedarnath*, *Water world* play major role in humanising climate change and makes it relatable to broad audience. Some of the notable works of climate fiction include *Solar* by Ian McEwan, *State of Fear* by Michael Crichton, *The Drowned World* by J.G. Ballard and *The Science in the Capital Trilogy* by Kim Stanley Robinson.

Climate narratives play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing collective attitudes and behaviour towards climate related issue. They offer solutions and pathways for addressing climate change. Climate change narratives treats climate change in two ways. It scrutinises climate change as a cultural phenomenon and emphasise climate change as a result of interlinked psychological, sociocultural, political and linguistic factors. It also suggests that climate change has turned the theoretical and existentialist problems into lived experience. It has the power to educate, mobilise and transform. The publication of *Silent Spring* created worldwide awareness on the side effects of DDT in global scale. Climate fiction through their narrative creates awareness about the future. Cli-fi often rests on the familiar trope of nightmarish new reality unleashed

by catastrophic events. In a world of apocalyptic cli-fi writers, few writers like Barbara Kingsolver, Rumen Alam and Kim Stanley Robinson write about the realism of future in eco-utopian way. They provided a sense of hope in their otherwise apocalyptic fictional world. Kim Stanley Robinson an environmental activist and American science fiction writer who has written more than 20 novels on climate change and has involved in various environmental and climate change related movements. His contributions to Cli-Fi have earned him prestigious awards like Hugo, Nebula and Locus.

Robinson's works often present a utopian or hopeful perspective on the future. While they acknowledge the serious threats posed by climate change and environmental degradation, they also offer solutions and possibilities for positive change. The second novel *Fifty Degrees Below* in his trilogy *Science in the Capital*, is a disaster narrative that deals with extreme weather conditions and melting of ice caps in North Atlantic due to global warming. The other books in the trilogy include *Forty Signs of Rain* and *Sixty Days and Counting*. This paper aims to investigate the influence of climate fiction in envisioning a sustainable future in the face of environmental crisis.

David Wallace-Wells opens his book with "It is worse, much worse, than you think." to convey the profound gravity of the climate crisis. He jolts the readers out of complacency and inspires a sense of urgency. Wallace-Wells delves into the dire consequences of global warming, and paints a vivid and unsettling picture of what could happen if we do not take action, which in turn motivate readers to engage with the issue more seriously. The fundamental paradox of climate fiction lies in the personal and emotional reactions to the devastation caused by climate change within a context of pervasive despair.

Amitav Ghosh notes this in his critique of climate fiction *The Great Derangement* (2016) that fiction is normally unequipped to deal with the sheer magnitude of the crisis. Ghosh quotes George Marshall to describe the challenges of climate change, according to him, "climate change is inherently uncanny: weather conditions, and the high carbon lifestyles that are changing them, are extremely familiar and yet have now been given a new menace and uncertainty" (40). The Cli-Fi writers discuss uncertainties of future through their works. They convey the despair or urgency to address the real world issue of climate change through their narrative.

According to Ghosh, Good climate fiction solves this by focusing on particular, almost-autobiographical accounts of the climate change, representing the massive in a microcosm. Kim Stanley Robinson as an activist and environmentalist brings in the real world scenarios of the present as the cause for the consequences of future in *Fifty Degrees Below*. He represents the climate crisis intertwined into the emotions and psychology of people living through it. *Forty Signs of Rain* starts with the description deteriorating climatic conditions in the Arctic, The thickness of Arctic ice pack was melting and thereby warming the atmosphere higher than the normal and half of the Arctic became open water. Towards the end of the novel three days of heavy rainfall, storms which lead to flash floods disrupt the city's peace. Half the city gets drowned, Khembalung city goes completely under water and the National Mall of Washington DC submerges under water and is transformed to temporary lake by the encroaching sea and animals from the zoo gets loose because of the improper arrangement of space for the wildlife species.

The novel *Fifty Degrees Below* starts a month after the flood and the characters trying to cope with the new reality. The whole country is in the state of despair as the foundation of their life gets disrupted. The protagonist, Frank Vanderwal, a climate scientist who works on the front lines of climate research struggles in understanding the magnitude of climate change and its consequences add to the narrative's sense of despair. As a scientist, he grapples with the implications of his own research and the challenges of communicating the urgency of the situation to a broader audience. The ecological devastation has left people in the state of 'honest sorrow', the term derived from Daniel Sherrell's memoir *Warmth*, where he talks about it as a the righteous and indignant grief

about the state of our planet, borne out of true engagement with despair. Some of the characters in the novel tries to find moral meaning behind this great devastation and accepts the flood as a capital punishment for treating the nature carelessly. The economy of the country takes a dip and the real estate price shoots up and people settle in tree houses to avoid housing problems. Khembalung, a small island in Nepal drowns and people from Khembalung are moved to Washington and they try to build a life from the scratch. National Science Foundation is left without proper funds to manage the disaster and The politicians tries to salvage the situation by giving speeches on Nature and 'we are at with nature'(2) and how it's a responsibility of the citizen to support rebuilding .

The portrayal of despair in the climate narrative can have a powerful influence on reader's perception and action. When activists like Greta Thunberg emphasize the urgency and severity of the climate crisis, stating "Our house is on fire. I am here to say, our house is on fire," it evokes a sense of impending doom that prompts readers to recognize the gravity of the situation. This portrayal of despair acts as a wake-up call, motivating people to take action. As Naomi Klein puts it, "The climate crisis is not an 'issue' for you to add to the list of things to worry about, next to health care and taxes. It is a civilizational wake-up call"(62). It conveys the urgent need for collective action in the face of an existential threat, driving individuals and societies to mobilize for climate solutions. By portraying despair, activists compel readers to confront the reality of the climate crisis and galvanize them into taking meaningful action.

In an article Turning Climate Despair into Action psychologist Britt Wray explains ecological breakdowns resulting from humanity's destruction of the natural world will create a sense of fear and can ensure chaos and can bring about series of increasingly dire crises. In her study on climate or eco anxiety she found, Three-quarters of respondents felt that the "future is frightening," about half said climate anxiety affected their daily lives, and nearly four in every 10 people feared having children due to the climate crisis. For some characters in the novel the despair stems from the belief that the planet has been irreparably damaged. A group of people who live in tree houses due to flood always gets into trouble and they try to involve themselves in carnal pleasures to take away the constant anxiety they are in. The characters in the novel loses the trust in the government and becomes more agitated, After the flood the crime rates gets increased and the lives of the characters in the story gets disrupted by extreme weather events and they lose their sense of security, "Hoarding has begun at the grocery stores and this was a breakdown of social trust that could be debilitating to normal supply dynamics" (365). This loss and disruption contribute to the sense of despair and uncertainty about the future.

Despair can bring about hope in climate narratives by serving as a catalyst for change and motivating individuals, communities and societies to take actions. Despair arises from the acknowledgment of the severity of climate change and it's far reaching consequences. "Everybody knows now the problem is real...Abrupt climate change is real and no one can deny it, and it's a big problem"(369). When the individuals confront the harsh reality of the climate related challenges it triggers personal growth and transformation. The belief in a better future can be a powerful motivator for individuals and communities to take action and implement resilience strategies. Characters in the novel find strength to take back their lost city. Characters in the novel volunteers to find the animals that went missing from the zoos. The government arranges a safe haven for the wild and congress government manages to allocate funds for science programs to find alternatives to survive the cold weather.

Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* states that as bleak as the climate change can be there is still a sense of hope, as it spread across the message of urgency among government and the public. He emphasizes that the struggle to achieve some kind of normal life in the apocalyptic world will be difficult and hard fought but there is still hope that humanity will rediscover the

kinship with other beings, “But I would like to believe that out of this struggle will be born a generation that will be able to look upon the world with clearer eyes than those that preceded it” (217). Because of the extreme cold conditions people started to get together in communities to protect each other. Frank along with his friends from tree-house rescues people and send them to hospital or community halls. They help clear the damaged areas and survey the feral animals from going extinct. The government has installed heat boxes for the animals to survive the winter. The characters go back to gardening and minimalistic way of living. Robinson draws parallels from history and offer hope by demonstrating that societies have the capacity to adapt, innovate and address the crisis when faced with despair.

Despair and Hope are the two powerful catalysts that lead way to resilience. Hope allows individuals to maintain resilience in the face of uncertainty. Believing in the potential for positive outcomes can help people weather challenging situations with greater emotional strength. Resilience refers to a system’s ability to adapt and recover from disturbances. Resistance, on the other hand, refers to a system’s ability to resist change or disturbance in the first place. These concepts are related but not interchangeable. A system can be resistant to change but not resilient, or resilient but not resistant to change. In Robinson’s novel *Fifty Degrees and Below*, the characters and the ecosystem are resilient to changes. Though the abrupt climate change poses the biggest problem for the survival of humans, nature still bounces back at all times. The over exploitation of natural resources has pushed the world towards an irredeemable point of environmental crisis. As a science advisor in the novel, Anna Quibbler showcases resilience by tirelessly advocating for climate change research and mitigation measures. Despite facing political obstacles and scepticism, she remains determined, making strides towards building awareness and bringing about necessary changes. Charlie Quibbler, the environmental advisor for Senator Chase had been instrumental in moving bills regarding climate change. The Quibblers advocated for climate crisis and did everything in their power to bring change.

Narratives of resilience in *Fifty Degrees Below* hold the power to inspire readers and society in multiple ways. They motivate individuals to take action, and inspire readers to engage in sustainability efforts to support climate policies. These stories serve as a reminder that human determination can make a difference, encourages readers to address climate challenges proactively. They raise awareness about the urgency of climate change, illustrating the potential consequences of inaction. Such narratives drive home the importance of prioritizing environmental issues and acknowledging the need for immediate action. Climate fiction also promotes innovation by showcasing technological and scientific solutions, stimulating interest in sustainable technology, renewable energy, and climate adaptation. This, in turn, can influence research, investment, and innovation in the field of climate science.

As the signs of global warming bring about disaster and humanitarian crises, people who see the cascading suffering due to climate change and fall into an inconsolable despair. The path we are on, as a resident of this planet, is terrifying and the only way to take command of our fate is to accept the responsibility we have towards the earth. A passage from Bhagvad Gita which was later quoted by Oppenheimer, father of Atomic Bomb, excerpt reads, “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds”. The threat of climate change is more serious than that of a nuclear bomb and unbridled use of natural resources will deplete the world of its resources. The climate narratives have the power to steer the focus of the generation from denying climate change to accepting their responsibility towards the future. Climate fiction bridges the gap between the imagination and reality and brings home the point concerns of the future should be addressed in the present to save the human beings from extinction. Naomi Klein in *This Changes Everything* quotes “The stakes are simply too high and time too short to settle for anything else”(466). It is the responsibility of every citizen to build

a world that is safe for all and climate narrative play a major role in influencing public perceptions and actions that needs to be taken to mitigate climate change.

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