

A Clarion Call for Eco-Centric Urgency in Cameron Stracher's *The Water War*

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“Turtles and river dolphins find refuge in your waters

Alighting herons play upon your tranquil surface.

Fish and crocodile are gathered in your embrace.” (Mehta, 1998:255)

In our ecologically unstable modern era, alarming news about droughts, pollution, population growth and climate change threaten to make water, even more than oil, the cause of war within our lifetime. The world appears to be running out of safe drinking water. Although water may be a human right, people in all parts of the world today as in the past, fight over water. Multinational corporations are usurping water from rivers, lakes and underground reservoirs to make money by selling bottled water, soft drinks, and to irrigate crops as food for cash. This is all at the expense of depriving affordable drinking water to poor people. In addition to this current economic crisis, state and local governments are debating whether to privatize public water distribution systems as a way to save

money. Water, rightly called as “blue gold” has become a biological, political, economic and ecological issue!

But while the global demand for water is on the rise, the supply is shrinking. Water-intensive industrial agriculture, urban and industrial pollution, breakneck industrial development and other ecological threats are depleting freshwater supplies. There is a growing struggle against corporations growing water-thirsty cash crops destined for export, while millions of people still go thirsty or fall sick from polluted water. The whole world has a pending water crisis and the future wars will be fought about water and food and not oil. The danger is that most citizens don't even know there's a problem and that indifference could cost us dearly.

It is this cold indifference that Cameron

Stracher attacks in her fascinating science fiction novel *The Water Wars* by laying bare the inevitable truth that the world is running out of its most precious resource and if we do not wake up to the clarion call, our posterity will have to face the effects of our usage of water.

The Water Wars, Cameron Stracher's first young adult novel presents a horrifying vision of the future. This novel has a strong environmental theme about the importance of conserving our natural resources and caring for our planet in order to avoid long-term and devastating consequences. The events of the novel takes place in the not-so-distant future, in which water has become more precious than oil and the newly established countries of the world are engaged in on-going wars for control of what little drinkable water does remain.

In the span of a single generation, humans have drained Earth's reservoirs of fresh water, melted and consumed its glaciers, and destroyed land-based wildlife across its continents. Water, the most precious and vital commodity for life has gone scarce and those that control the precious few remaining reserves hold all the power. In a squabble for power, the United States have been broken up and reformed into eight

independent super states, constantly at war with each other and with the Empire of Canada to the north. "Earth existed in perfect balance, but humanity did not" (186).

Set against this backdrop, *The Water Wars* follows 15-year-old Vera and her older brother Will who live in the Republic of Illinowa – what's left of the Midwestern US in a future where the politics of water determine whether you have enough water to thrive or not. They live in the shadow of 'Great Panic' in a country that has collapsed from environmental catastrophe inaccessible to fresh water. Teenagers Vera and Will have never known about grassy parks or swimming pools, which seem like made-up stories from an extravagant time that they can hardly believe existed. "Our father remembered rivers, but now the rivers were gone. Our mother remembered boat trips and warm baths, but now she was ill" (166). Their world is dry and harsh, with few animals, synthetic food, and dry chemical washes. It is a parched, bleak world. Vera says, "It took willful neglect and deliberate blindness, the refusal to see the obvious even as the land grew toxic before our eyes" (200). Potable water is distilled from the ocean. This water is tightly rationed and very expensive. Humans would be lucky to

have a glass of the government distributed ocean filtered water each day which seems to cause more illness than satisfy one's thirst. "There wasn't a single one who appeared healthy' (136). Men had dug so deep for water that salt had leached into the wells, and unnamed diseases lived in what remained. To quote the opening page of the novel:

We lived then in a time of drought and war. The great empires had fallen and been divided. The land was parched and starved for moisture, and the men who lived on it fought for every drop. Outside, the wind howled like something wounded. Inside, our skin flaked, and our eyes stung and burned. Our tongues were like thick snakes asleep in dark graves. (1)

All her life Vera had been told not to waste even a drop of water. If she did and got caught, she even risked punishment by the authorities. "Wasting water was illegal. There were fines, and even prison sentences, for exceeding the quotas" (2). But then one day waiting for her school bus, she sees a boy named Kai emptying a cup of water on a deserted road. This very act is unheard of, illegal, and grotesque even in a world where severe water shortages have divided what was the United States into several warring republics. "Men would kill for a glass of

water, and did" (9). Vera quickly becomes obsessed with finding out more about Kai, the mysterious boy who claims to have a limitless supply of water.

Kai even claims to know the location of a secret river, something that has fallen to the status of mere myth in a world where people depend on the government's paltry rations of the world's remaining water to survive. Thus when he says, "I know a river," (31) his words seem impossible yet tantalizing to Vera and her brother, Will, whose mother is slowly dying for lack of clean water. "Maybe it was the water. Maybe it was the air. Maybe it was the earth itself. Whatever the cause, people were sick, and not just our mother" (17). Vera is intrigued by the lost river Kai keeps talking about, even though everyone knows that all the rivers dried up years ago. Shaped by severe drought, their civilization is caught in a power struggle among governments and between governments and outsiders such as pirates and environmentalists.

Kai remains a mystery. The son of a driller, he travels in a limo with a bodyguard, yet relishes the humble company Vera and her family have to offer. Unfortunately, before Vera can figure out Kai's story or her feelings for him, he disappears. Vera feels it's up to her to rescue

Kai. With the help of her brother Will and the friends they meet along the way, Vera sets off on an incredible and perilous journey to save the boy she just met, risking her own life in the process. In their journey, the teens are bounced from one dangerous situation to the next with little breathing room or time for reflection. First they are captured by water pirates, led by Ulysses. Then militant environmentalists blow up a dam and the pair almost drowns. Next they are captured and sold to child slavers. Ulysses, whom they thought had drowned in the flood, rescues them from the slavers. Thus, they come upon all kinds of humanity from the unexpectedly righteous to the dangerous to the greedy and merciless, all locked in a battle for water and wealth that must be won by whatever means possible. The story concludes with the finding of Kai and the defeat of the multi-national companies and the controlling government thus putting an end to the vicious control of the water.

Stracher takes us on a fast paced thrill ride through a terrifying world without water. The greed and power-mongering caused by such a severe shortage of what we truly require to survive is realistically drawn. Stracher's vision of the political and economic implications of the panic caused

by the dwindling of the one resource nations once treated as infinite is wholly believable.

The Water Wars is so effective because it paints a stark, horrifying picture of what very well could be the Earth's future. The world without water that Cameron Stracher created here feels incredibly real, mainly because in today's world it could be a reality in the not too distant future. Bereft of fresh water, life on the planet could face extinction, and the images of fighting super nations, struggling for ownership of dams, technology and controlling populations through contrived wars all sound convincing and true. Furthermore, the descriptions of polluted oceans, heavy with alkalis and toxins from "desalinization," mysterious sicknesses, and synthetic food and water carefully controlled by corporate hands are all resonant, scary thoughts. Stracher is able to weave a convincing portrait of how people would adapt to a world where water is the most precious resource around. He creates a realistic future. It hits home to the reader how much we take our survival necessities for granted. Cameron Stracher creates a combination of urban decay, sun-baked desert and futuristic technology as he tells the story of Vera and her brother Will, who are struggling to survive in a world that has been drained of its natural resources.

Thematically, *The Water Wars* manages to provoke thought and inspire change as an environmental thriller ought to do. To quote, Michael Pollak and Margaret MacNabb (1998), “if a[n] environmental horror is described in a novel, complete with the human element and the emotional consequences, a reader is touched – and takes to heart what is at stake”.

Though the storyline seems unrealistic involving some kids and a rescue mission thrown in the mix making it a little funky, the messages presented in *The Water Wars* is a powerful one that will force one to never take water for granted again. Vandhana Shiva, the popular environmental activist in her book, *Bechtel water involvement*, points out the necessity of understanding that once the drinkable water is gone, there are no alternatives. The fragile balance between man and nature should neither be disrupted nor disregarded. Garrard speaks about deep ecology which insists upon a shift from a human-centered to a nature-centered system of values. He quotes from George Sessions’s anthology *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* thus:

Deep ecology is concerned with encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans not only toward all members of the ecosphere but even toward

all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. Thus, this attitude is intended to extend, for example, to such entities (or forms) as rivers, landscapes, and even species and social system considered in their own right (Garrard, 2004:21-22).

In the opening pages of *Cross Creek*, her 1942 memoir about her life in the Florida backwoods, Rawlings proclaims that “the consciousness of land and water must lie deeper in the core of us than any knowledge of our fellow beings. We were bred of the earth before we were born of our mothers... We cannot live without the earth or apart from it, and something is shriveled in a man’s heart when he turns away from it and concerns himself only with the affairs of men (Marjorie, 1942: 3).

The novel thus brings to light an important issue namely the squandering of natural resources that young people as well as adults should be thinking about now before it is too late. As rightly told by Cheryll Glotfelty in *Literary studies in an age of environmental crisis*, “We need to act generously and with care in the presence of unending ecological change (Glotfelty, 1996: xxiii).

Stracher presents a scary portrait of what might happen once we have wasted our last

sip of fresh water. Through a compelling story he has made an attempt to cultivate a sense of environmental responsibility and stewardship in today's youth. This trenchant cautionary tale of a world drained of its most precious resource is a truly frightening wake up call for young readers everywhere to protect mother Earth.

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