Survival and Power in Climate Fiction: A Comparative Study of *The Snowpiercer* and *Parable of the Sower*

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Abstract:

Survival and Power in Climate Fiction: A Comparative Study of The Snowpiercer and Parable of the Sower offers an examination of survival, hierarchy, and power in climate fiction. Both texts construct dystopian worlds in which environmental collapse amplifies existing social inequities and exposes the structural violence embedded in modern civilisation. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Amitav Ghosh, Rob Nixon, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Michel Foucault, the paper argues that cli-fi operates not only as speculative storytelling but as a critical lens through which to interrogate the political and ethical implications of the Anthropocene.

Lob tells the story of the train that houses the last of civilisation, whose rigid class divisions determine access to heat, food, and survival. Butler's narrative renders collapse as a slow violence embedded in capitalism, resource scarcity, and moral decay. Central to Butler's work is Earthseed—a philosophy of adaptive survival articulated by protagonist Lauren Olamina—which offers an ethical counterpoint to the authoritarian faith of The Snowpiercer's Brotherhood of the Engine. Earthseed philosophy reimagines survival as adaptive, communal, and ethically grounded. By placing these texts in dialogue, the paper demonstrates how narratives of collapse illuminate the cultural, political, and ethical dimensions of climate change, urging a reconsideration of survival as not only a material struggle but a profoundly philosophical one.

Keywords: climate fiction, environmental collapse, speculative fiction, dystopian literature, climate crisis, social hierarchy.

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In an age of rising seas, burning forests, and fractured societies, the question is no longer how to live but how to survive when living itself becomes an act of resistance. The term climate fiction, credited to journalist Dan Bloom, although emerging in the 21st century, has existed as a literary concept for much longer, through which several writers have explored the consequences of ecological collapse. From J.G. Ballard's vision of environmental downfall in *The Drowned World* (1962) to Margaret Atwood's universe where genetic manipulation spirals into ecological disaster in her *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–2013), and finally Kim Stanley Robinson's recent work, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), a narrative of climate politics and global reform, climate fiction has continually sought to capture the psychological and political dimensions of living on a damaged planet. These authors have become central figures in shaping the intellectual and ethical landscape of climate fiction.

Within this literary sphere, the theme of survival occupies a pivotal position. It depicts survival not merely as a biological struggle but as a moral, social, and philosophical challenge. This paper examines survival through two landmark works of climate fiction: Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Jacques Lob's *The Snowpiercer* (1982). Through their speculative depictions of ecological collapse, both texts, though different in form, the former a prose narrative and the latter a graphic novel, imagine worlds where environmental collapse exposes the fragile foundations of modern civilisation. In the midst of these ruins, they amplify how survival takes many forms, through hierarchy, power, control, adaptation, and empathy.

In *The Snowpiercer*, the remnants of humanity inhabit a perpetually moving train divided by strict class stratifications. At the same time, in *Parable of the Sower*, Butler envisions a near-future America ravaged by climate change, resource depletion, and social decay. A frozen world and a burning America, though different in setting, embody similar anxieties. Drawing on theorists

such as Amitav Ghosh, Rob Nixon, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Michel Foucault, the paper will reveal how both works of fiction portray a type of social crisis that is born out of environmental collapse.

Butler's and Lob's dystopian worlds begin amid ecological catastrophe. The last surviving humans are confined aboard *The Snowpiercer*, once a luxury train, now years later, with "its thousand cars" stands as the "last bastion of civilization" (Lob 23). The frozen apocalypse began with "the bomb that destroyed our climate," a direct consequence of scientific arrogance and militarised maladaptation (81). This technological hubris triggered "a terribly cold wind that blew everything away . . . life, civilization . . . everything eradicated within mere hours" (82). The protagonist, Proloff, who lived in the last compartment of the train since the start of its journey, witnesses the opulent compartments of the upper classes for the first time after he escapes from the tail end. By presenting the narrative through Proloff's escape, the text depicts the staggering inequality between the classes of the train, thereby foregrounding class consciousness, moral dissonance, and ethical decay of a system that sustains luxury for a privileged few at the expense of many. The train is a self-contained ecosystem, a microcosm of a ruined, frozen earth.

In Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, the climate catastrophe manifests in the opposite extreme of *The Snowpiercer*'s frozen wasteland, taking the form of relentless drought, oppressive heat, and a world ravaged by scarcity. This world is marked by scarcity so severe that "water now costs several times as much as gasoline," and its natural landscapes are destroyed by corporate greed and human neglect (Butler 16). The narrative unfolds through the protagonist Lauren Olamina's diary entries, by way of which readers witness California's gradual unravelling of its ecosystems, infrastructure, and social bonds collapsing in tandem. As she observes, there "are too many poor people— illiterate, jobless, homeless, without decent sanitation or clean water" (47). The scarcity

of clean water symbolises human failure to protect natural resources, as "[t]hey have plenty of water…but a lot of it is polluted" (47). Butler's realism grounds the apocalypse, making the catastrophe less of speculative fantasy and more of a plausible future.

Unlike the immediate environmental crisis in *The Snowpiercer*, Butler situates collapse within a slower, more insidious decline. Rob Nixon depicts "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). Butler's world exemplifies this hidden violence within daily struggle. Lauren captures this firsthand as she notes how "things are unraveling, disintegrating bit by bit" (Butler 110). The slow but sure decline is reinforced through the transformation of Robledo, the protagonist's once-stable suburban refuge.

This neighbourhood was earlier "a rich, green, unwalled little city"; now, outside the wall, "in Robledo, most of the street poor—squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general—are dangerous" (9). The evolution of Robledo from a safe, open community into a walled enclave encapsulates the larger trajectory of civilisational decline. The gradual collapse avoids the spectacle of abrupt apocalyptic events used for shock effect typical of science fiction, choosing instead to document the gradual breakdown of ordinary life shaped under capitalism, ecological neglect, and moral fatigue. This slow descent is far more unsettling because it mirrors the real world, where the correlation between climate degradation and inequality unfolds progressively and is normalised by those who live through it. The walls of Robledo, meant to protect, become emblems of fear, separation, and the illusion of safety. The text portrays climate collapse not as a singular catastrophe but as a continuum of decline, a creeping apocalypse that corrodes society from within. The contrast between walled and unwalled spaces underscores environmental degradation's entanglement with social stratification.

In both texts, class divisions intensify under the pressure of ecological collapse, exposing how environmental disaster amplifies pre-existing inequalities. In *The Snowpiercer*, Proloff reflects on the day the train departed, remembering that he was unable to reach the upper-class sections and only barely managed to secure a place in the last car (Lob 26). The "inaccessible luxury cars" (44) stand in stark contrast to the "tail end" where "everybody's living in permanent twilight" as they lack even windows (30). The train has a spatial hierarchy, separating the different classes of people, transforming mobility, and even access to daylight into a privilege that only the rich can afford.

Where *The Snowpiercer* encloses humanity in steel compartments, *Parable of the Sower* encloses it behind literal walls. Lauren writes about how the rich have insulated themselves from collapse by living in "walled estates" which had "one big house and a lot of shacky little dependencies where the servants lived" (Butler 8). The poor were confined to decaying neighbourhoods with "walls made up of unmortared rocks," while the poorest lived outside these walls, exposed to the most brutal forms of violence (8). Nevertheless, even walls cannot secure permanence, as they "wrapped [their] community wall around [themselves] and huddled in [their] illusions of security" (118). Lauren's observation that the rich sit "behind [their] walls, looking clean and fat and rich to the hungry, thirsty, homeless, jobless, filthy people outside" underscores the moral fragility of privilege and dismantles the illusion that one can remain untouched by collective ruin (167).

In this sense, the walled communities of *Parable of the Sower* mirror the first-class cars of *The Snowpiercer* as both embody societies sustained by exclusion, where luxury survives only through the invisibility and exploitation of others. Butler invites readers to confront the ethical bankruptcy of isolation, suggesting that true survival cannot be built on the suffering of those left

outside the walls. As Ghosh warns, environmental crises "exacerbat[e] state weakness, forcing human migrations, and triggering riots, civil disobedience, and vandalism," all of which are evident in both texts (Ghosh). His warning resonates most sharply in these literal and metaphorical enclosures, where the politics of space reveal the politics of survival. The barriers are visible; walls and train compartments become symbols of civilisation's failure to bridge the human divide in the face of environmental catastrophe. What begins as protection devolves into segregation, demonstrating how crises amplify inequality rather than unify humanity. The inability of societies to transcend their walls becomes the ultimate failure of modern civilisation.

The gap in the human divide is even more starkly visible in the ruthless scarcity of resources. The remnants of civilisation in *The Snowpiercer* reveal a grotesque hierarchy of consumption, as Proloff has "never seen a horticulture car before" (Lob 41) and was shocked to see "real coffee" (11) and "canned vegetables" (24). Food, a basic human necessity, becomes a marker of status and a weapon of control. Here, access to natural food is a symbol of privilege. The first-class citizens ate rabbits because "this end of the train, people appreciate more traditional foodstuff" (74). The third class subsist on synthetic protein from "the meat plant… where all of the train's artificial meat is being produced" (49). Finally, "[if] hell does exist, then it's back there" at the tail end, where there is "nothing for food but those bodies," insinuating that the extreme deprivation has led to cannibalism (96). This chilling path to cannibalism exposes how ecological scarcity intensifies moral and social collapse. The upper classes' ability to consume "traditional foodstuff" signifies not only comfort but also domination, as seen through their right to experience life in a world stripped of it. Meanwhile, those in the tail end consume what is literally unthinkable, their humanity reduced to biological survival.

Similarly, in Butler's world, "food prices are insane," and desperate people kill water peddlers to survive (71). The commodification of necessities becomes so extreme that violence becomes a normalised response to scarcity. When Lauren ventures beyond her walled haven, she encounters "kids and their cannibal feast," an image that becomes an uncanny echo of *The Snowpiercer*'s state of affairs (244). In both texts, cannibalism functions not merely as a shocking detail but as a symbolic endpoint of total social breakdown. It is the moment when the boundary between human and animal collapses under the pressure of starvation. Both worlds expose how material depletion collapses morality, turning hunger itself into the ultimate weapon of inequality. These scenes illustrate how extreme deprivation transforms ethical norms into a matter of survival, compelling the vulnerable toward unthinkable acts. Lob and Butler therefore use the motif of cannibalism to present hunger as a structural violence. In their texts, violence is a condition produced by systems of neglect and exploitation, rather than a natural inevitability.

In the face of ecological collapse, hierarchy operates as the central force of survival, determining who lives and who does not. Recalling the origins of the disaster, Proloff says, "they assured us that the climate weapon was fully operational" (Lob 82), revealing how the political and military powers were the reason behind this frozen wasteland. It reveals the critical truth that the apocalypse in *The Snowpiercer* was not the result of an unforeseen natural catastrophe but a deliberate outcome of power misused. The very institutions entrusted with safeguarding civilisation caused its destruction, demonstrating how concentrated power can produce irreversible environmental harm under the guise of progress or security. In this context, the ruling elites are not simply negligent but act as architects of annihilation.

During the early months of the apocalypse, a devastating event occurred called "the wild assault," where the tail end people were "punished with a massacre!" (Lob 84). Proloff says it was

"when things got more and more cramped" in the tail end, while the rich were "stretching" in their luxury compartments, "warm and well fed…in order for us to survive, the system had to be toppled!" (97). The tail end uprising reflects not mere rebellion, but a desperate struggle for survival. Yet, the train's rigid class hierarchy remains meticulously upheld by those in power who refuse to alleviate the suffering of the tail section, knowing that doing so would require giving up their own comfort and privilege. Power in the text thus manifests as containment; the lower classes are both physically and politically confined, and their existence is justified by a hierarchy that mirrors pre-apocalyptic governance. As Foucault argues in his idea of bio-power, such hierarchy guarantees "relations of domination and effects of hegemony" (141).

Furthermore, when a group advocating for the rights of the tail class, led by Adeline Belleau, tries to bring about change, they are called "tailsuckers," a derogatory term intended to demean and delegitimise their cause (Lob 28). This insult functions as a linguistic tool of oppression, reinforcing the social divide and discouraging empathy for the marginalised. The use of dehumanising language exposes how systems of power sustain themselves not only through material control but also through rhetoric that stigmatises anything that will come in the way of their power. Belleau's movement thus becomes representative of the moral decay within the train's social order, where even the pursuit of justice is slandered to preserve an unjust world.

Parable of the Sower portrays hierarchy within the capitalist world of corporate power, showing how economic desperation transforms citizens into a vulnerable labour force. Society has devolved into what Lauren's father calls "debt slavery" (Butler 107), exemplified by the town of Olivar, where a company "called Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton, and Company—KSF—has taken over the running of a small coastal city" (111). The company promises security and stability in exchange for work, yet "there's nothing safe about slavery", says Lauren's father (107). Butler

exposes how corporate entities exploit climate catastrophe to consolidate power, thereby turning basic survival into a commodity and binding workers to systems from which they cannot escape. *The Snowpiercer*'s elite hoard resources while the poor are dehumanised as expendable cargo, and Butler's corporations monopolise water, energy, and humans, transforming survival into servitude. As Nixon writes, neoliberal systems produce "disposable people" (4), sacrificed to sustain elite comfort. Both authors have a shared moral vision that environmental and social hierarchies are inseparable and "a true ecological approach must integrate questions of justice… to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (Ghosh).

Hierarchy is therefore not merely a thing of the old world; it is the force that drives modern civilisation's ongoing collapse. However, Ghosh's observation that "the climate crisis holds the potential of drastically reordering the global distribution of power as well as wealth," resonates in both narratives (Ghosh). He contends that the climate crisis is not merely an environmental phenomenon but a profound geopolitical and economic disruption. According to Gosh, as climate change intensifies, the structures that once upheld the wealth and authority of the few will begin to fracture, revealing the fragility of the system. In this light, both texts serve as warnings that systems built on exploitation may temporarily protect the elite, but under the weight of planetary instability, these hierarchies cannot endure.

If catastrophe reveals hierarchy, it also tests humanity's capacity to adapt. In *The Snowpiercer*, the affluent compartments cling to ritualised normalcy, as they are seen "calmly sitting here, at a table in front of a carefully prepared meal… as if the good days had never ended" (Lob 84). This performance of civility, staged in the midst of planetary ruin, underscores the psychological insulation available only to the privileged. The response, "we are pretending that things are fine!" exposes denial as a coping mechanism (84). Entertainment further sustains this

illusion with an "onboard cinema! . . . Casablanca's on tonight and they showed Star Wars this afternoon" (112). Such spectacles act as tools, numbing the anxieties of collapse and enabling the privileged to inhabit a simulated past where disaster has no moral or material consequence.

In Butler's world, adaptation assumes both physical and social forms of camouflage: "You're supposed to be dirty now . . . It's better than getting beaten up all the time" (Butler 16). Cleanliness becomes a threat, while dirt transforms into a protective disguise. Before leaving her walled neighbourhood, Lauren reflects that she was ''thinking of traveling as a man" because it would be safer, so she decides to cut her hair (153). Whether through performance or bodily transformation, survival in these dystopian worlds demands not resistance alone but an ongoing negotiation of identity and adaptation.

In a world stripped of order, humanity is compelled to reconstruct its moral and philosophical foundations. The remnants of civilisation cling to new faiths, ideologies, and adaptive ethics to justify existence amid ruin. In *The Snowpiercer*, this reconstitution takes the form of technological worship, embodied by the "machine-priests" of the Brotherhood of the Engine, who transform the train's machinery into a sacred entity; they proclaim, "let us concentrate and turn all of our thoughts to her, the most holy engine" (Lob 60). However, this faith reveals its hypocrisy when the engine begins to falter because it is "pulling too much weight" (72). The Brotherhood's endorsement of disconnecting the end cars exposes their moral decay as they believe that as long as they "drag the cars in the tail end along with the rabble inside," their "prayers aren't going to have much of an effect on the engine" (61). This faith mirrors the elitism of the upper classes, reducing spirituality to a system of control and self-gain. The Brotherhood thus becomes a chilling allegory of how pseudo-religion, in times of collapse, can be used to legitimise inequality and rationalise inhumanity under the guise of devotion.

Butler's work offers a counterpoint where ethics evolve through empathy rather than domination. Lauren Olamina's "hyperempathy" makes her physically experience the pain and emotions of others, or what she believes they feel (Butler 10). Her condition results from her mother "abusing—a prescription drug; when she got pregnant" with her (249). What her society deems as disability becomes a radical moral strength. She recognises that "if hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint" people would not do the things they do "if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture?" (102). Her suffering thus becomes the foundation of an alternative ethical consciousness. When Lauren kills an attacker, she experiences "empathic agony" (210). It blurs opposing forces of thought where harming others that harm her becomes both a necessity and a source of torment, illustrating the depth to which the ethics of violence are reshaped.

Out of this pain emerges Earthseed, her spiritual philosophy of adaptation: "I am Earthseed. Anyone can be" (Butler 69). Unlike the rigid worship of the engine, Earthseed celebrates flux. Its central tenet, "God is Change", is repeated throughout the novel (15). It rejects fixed hierarchies and static morality. Lauren envisions a new collective humanity, suggesting survival through transformation rather than control. Her Earthseed community, unlike *The Snowpiercer*'s Brotherhood of the Engine, is bound by cooperation and empathy as, "[They] don't kill unless someone threatens [them] . . . If one of [them] is in need, the rest help out" (271). Both worlds reimagine faith and morality within environmental ruin. The Brotherhood's devotion to the engine represents faith corrupted by power. Earthseed, by contrast, embodies ethical evolution, offering a belief system that transforms pain into unity. The two philosophies capture the core dilemma of post-collapse survival, whether humanity will continue to replicate systems of domination or transcend them through compassion and change. Through these contrasting visions, Lob and

Butler assert that the future of civilisation cannot depend solely on technology, but on the capacity to redefine ethics while the world is on the verge of extinction.

The dystopian landscapes of *The Snowpiercer* and *Parable of the Sower* are not distant futures; they echo real life. Dipesh Chakrabarty observes that "Climate change, refracted through global capital, will no doubt accentuate the logic of inequality that runs through the rule of capital; some people will no doubt gain temporarily at the expense of others" (221). His argument dismantles the illusion of elite immunity, revealing that no social or economic class remains untouched by planetary crisis. This insight finds powerful resonance in *The Snowpiercer*, where even the upper classes ultimately succumb to the system's collapse and in *Parable of the Sower*, where wealth and privilege offer no protection against ultimate ecological devastation. Both narratives affirm Chakrabarty's claim that climate catastrophe transcends the hierarchies of capitalism, exposing the shared vulnerability of all humanity. Together, these works insist that environmental collapse is never solely ecological, it is profoundly social, moral, and political. In *The Snowpiercer*, the disconnection of the tail-end cars portrays how systems of power sacrifice many for the comfort of a few. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren Olamina's Earthseed offers an ethical alternative—survival through change.

The symbolic depth of Butler's novel is demonstrated through its title, *Parable of the Sower*, which the text explicitly links to the biblical story of the same name. Quoted at the novel's very end, the verse functions as a key to interpret Butler's novel, illuminating its ethical vision of survival in an age of environmental collapse. In the verse, the sower scatters seeds, and they fall on different types of ground. Butler reimagines this metaphor to imply that Earthseed is the seed, Lauren is the sower, and people themselves are the ground upon which the future may or may not take root. The seeds that fall "by the way side," "upon a rock," or "among thorns" mirror the human

responses to catastrophe within the novel (qtd. in Butler 295). Many individuals, unable or unwilling to adapt, are destroyed by violence and their own rigid adherence to collapsing systems of the old world. They become the barren soil in which nothing can take root.

On the other hand, individuals such as Lauren and her emerging Earthseed community are capable of adaptation, imagination, and moral transformation. They represent the fertile ground in which new forms of life, ethics, and resilience can flourish. In environmental crisis, some individuals cling to collapsing structures, wither under fear or harden into violence, while others grow into agents of transformation. Through this, Butler ultimately argues that survival in an age of climate collapse, the fate of humanity depends not merely on external conditions but on the internal soil of individuals and communities. It refers to the individual's willingness to receive new ideas, cultivate resilience, and grow beyond the ruins of the world.

In this sense, the novel itself operates as a parable. Butler positions the text as scattered seed, asking whether contemporary readers will receive its message as fertile ground or whether, like so many of the novel's characters, they will allow denial, rigidity, or fear to choke the possibility of change. In doing so, *Parable of the Sower* becomes not merely a story about survival but a cautionary tale, challenging readers to consider the ethical demands of life in a rapidly deteriorating world and to ultimately question what kind of ground they choose to be.

Traditional fiction, Ghosh argues, has often failed to register climate change as a lived, human reality. The central thesis of Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* is found in the line, "The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh). Here, he argues that climate change is not only the result of emissions, industry, or failed policy, but it is rooted in the ways modern culture teaches us to think and imagine, which reinforce the same worldview that enabled ecological destruction. In other words, the problem is not just in our factories and cars, it

is in our stories. According to him, the climate crisis is "a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination," by which he means that culture, including literature, has failed to help us see, feel, and narrate the planetary reality we live in (Ghosh). The crisis is not only environmental but also imaginative, because we lack stories that connect human life to the immense, unpredictable forces of the earth. Both works portray how Butler and Lob confront that crisis, using speculative fiction to propel readers to see the social and moral implications of climate change.

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