

Climate crisis and climate refugees in Jeff Murray's *Melt*

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Abstract

Discussions and debates surrounding climate change have increasingly shifted from environmental issues—such as global warming, rising sea levels, droughts, and extreme weather events—to a thorough examination of their impact on human populations. A significant focus has emerged on the concept of “climate refugees,” highlighting the urgent problem of forced displacement caused by the climate crisis. Climate fiction, a notable subgenre of science fiction, serves as an essential function in illuminating the pressing challenges associated with climate change and its effects on society. One of the most alarming outcomes of climate change is the emergence of a distinct refugee crisis: the rising number of individuals who become climate refugees.

This paper engages in a detailed analysis of Jeff Murray's portrayal of climate-induced forced migration in his novel *Melt*. The paper assesses how effectively the text communicates the seriousness of the climate crisis and its implications, with particular attention to the significant issues faced by climate refugees.

Key terms: climate crisis, climate refugee, climate politics, resilience, and survival

Introduction

Climate change represents one of the most critical challenges of our time, signifying a pivotal moment in human history. Its widespread consequences, including erratic weather patterns that threaten food security and rising sea levels that exacerbate the risk of devastating floods, underscore its global significance. The scale and severity of these crises are unprecedented, necessitating urgent and decisive action. Failure to intervene promptly will result in a future where adapting to emerging situations becomes increasingly complex and costly, imposing considerable challenges on societies worldwide.

The discourse surrounding climate change has permeated scientific, political, and social spheres, focusing on understanding its causes, consequences, and mitigation strategies. Although empirical studies provide essential data for policymakers to formulate regulatory frameworks, public engagement and perception remain critical aspects of this dialogue. A notable limitation within climate change discussions is their disproportionate reliance on data-driven narratives, which, while significant, often do not convey the emotional and moral urgency necessary to galvanize widespread action.

The disconnect between abstract scientific findings and the lived experiences of individuals can hinder effective communication regarding climate change. Fiction, as a literary medium, offers a compelling avenue to bridge this gap by presenting imaginative and emotionally resonant portrayals of environmental themes. Historically, literature has played a pivotal role in shaping public discourse on pressing social issues, and climate fiction has emerged as a distinct genre that integrates speculative storytelling with environmental concerns. By rendering climate change more tangible, climate fiction engages readers in ways that traditional scientific reports may not achieve. It is acknowledged that there are technically two strands of narration. One is the 'grand narrative' on climate change, and the other is a specific individual's encounter with climate change appearing as 'little narratives.'

Among the myriad consequences of climate change, the emergence of Environmentally Displaced Persons (EDP) or climate refugees—individuals who are compelled to abandon their homes due to climate-induced disasters—represents a particularly urgent issue, and they are not considered as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention (Jayawardhan) even though they are refugees only due to the climate crisis.

This paper examines Jeff Murray's novel *Melt*, focusing on its portrayal of climate-induced migration. The paper aims to assess the effectiveness of the text in

conveying the urgency of the climate crisis, with particular attention to the experiences of climate refugees following such events. By doing so, this paper seeks to highlight the implications of climate change for vulnerable populations and the significance of addressing their plight within the broader climate discourse.

Climate Crisis and Climate Refugees

As climate change accelerates, a growing crisis is unfolding where millions are being forced to flee from their homes. Individuals are being compelled to abandon their homes not because of armed conflict or persecution, but due to rising sea levels, extended droughts, and extreme weather events. The term “climate refugees” is frequently employed in the media to describe those displaced by climate-related disasters, yet it lacks formal recognition in international law. The 1951 Refugee Convention offers protection solely to those fleeing war, violence, conflict, or persecution across international borders, leaving the majority of climate displacement unaddressed within countries. It is pertinent to note that political scientists and environmental policy scholars Biermann and Boas insist on the term ‘climate refugee,’ which has strong moral connotations and acknowledges the legitimacy and urgency of the problem of climate change (Jayawardhan).

Although climate change itself is not explicitly covered by the convention, its effects may heighten an individual’s risk of persecution or violence. Unlike economic migrants, who relocate in search of better opportunities, or refugees escaping persecution, climate refugees are uprooted due to the direct and indirect impacts of the climate crisis. Climate migration is no longer a hypothetical concern; it is an emerging reality that necessitates immediate consideration.

Climate change is displacing millions, causing individuals to lose their livelihoods as a result of floods, experience hunger due to failed harvests or drought, or be forced to leave their homes because of desertification, rising sea levels, or insufficient access to clean drinking water. For countless climate refugees, this situation represents a stark reality. The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), a notable global think tank, cautions that climate displacement will continue to rise, projecting that as many as 1.2 billion people may be forced to relocate by 2050 due to increasingly severe weather and natural disasters.

Commentators are now actively discussing the reality of climate migration. As highlighted by an article in the New York Times on 23.07.2020 with the headline “The Great Climate Migration Has Begun,” which clearly proclaims that the climate refugees that we once imagined to be a future scenario is already emerging. However, it is disturbing to note that some still believe that it is imaginative and a scenario of a

distant future. It is here that climate fiction has to play a vital role in the sensitizing process.

Melt by Jeff Murray

Jeff Murray is an insightful New Zealand writer and futurist whose compelling debut novel, *Melt* (2019), addresses the pressing issues of climate change, migration, and geopolitics. It encourages readers to consider the real-world repercussions of environmental crises seriously, particularly for the regions in the Pacific, New Zealand, and Antarctica.

Set against the backdrop of the year 2048, *Melt* follows Vai Shuster, a determined young woman from the island nation of Independence, as she navigates the catastrophic aftermath of an eight-day cyclone that renders her homeland uninhabitable. Assigned with the critical task of advocating for her community's resettlement in New Zealand, Vai confronts the stark indifference faced by climate refugees as they are in the crossfire where rising political priorities intersect with increasing global interest in Antarctica.

In a world fundamentally altered by climate disaster, Vai joins forces with allies like Miriama, an enterprising property developer with ambitious resettlement plans. Together, they embark on a daring journey across the Southern Ocean, ultimately reaching a Chinese base in Antarctica. In her fight to secure a future for her island people, Vai navigates a landscape marked by environmental challenges and geopolitical turmoil, highlighting the urgent need for empathy and concerted action in an ever-changing world.

Victims of the Crisis

Murray exemplifies climate refugees as some of the most vulnerable individuals without any political clout or voice impacted by ecological collapse. Vai Shuster's island community becomes a casualty of the climate crisis due to unpredictable storms that devastate their land and cause rising sea levels, rendering their island uninhabitable. "In her twenty-eight years, Vai had learned that everything could break, but somehow she'd never imagined that would include her home." (Ch.1) Vai confronts the unimaginable loss of her home; it also highlights the emotional and existential impact of environmental ruin on individuals who once thought their world was safe and secure.

Many of the islanders, including Vai Shuster, are left homeless and destitute as the effects of the climate crisis intensify. Apart from their destroyed homes, seawater contaminates their natural drinking water sources, leaving the islanders with severe food shortages and limited access to clean drinking water. This puts their lives

in even greater danger of increasing the possibility of waterborne illnesses like tuberculosis. "There's a new strain of TB in these islands. Nothing's working on it. Nothing yet. If you have TB, you need to make sure you don't cough on anyone" (Ch.3). Murray makes the occurrence of TB very personal by introducing Emma, Vai's sister, as one afflicted with TB among other islanders of Independence. The harsh reality that Dr. Zhu's diagnosis of TB brings to light progressively intensifies their fight for survival. Murray demonstrates how the islanders, including Vai Shuster and her family, are not merely portrayed as helpless victims of the climatic catastrophe, but as communities and individuals they go through a significant but difficult transition. As their homes and lands become uninhabitable, survival, and particularly their health, become a struggle and a priority for the islanders.

However, Murray conveys both a beacon of hope and an inevitable shift in an increasingly unfavorable world by narrating a painful journey from being victims of the climate crisis to struggling survivors in a world that offers little refuge.

Survivors in an Unfavourable World

Jeff Murray's narrative portrays an unfavorable world through a combination of environmental degradation, political indifference, and the emotional despair of the islanders of Independence. A representative from the New Zealand government arrives to announce decisions made by the Adjustment Office. Despite the island's inability to sustain its residents due to the devastating effects of climate change, the government has decided to delay their migration to New Zealand for another decade. They are not in a position to decide for themselves about their future.

"The island's broken. We've accepted that. We're ready to go now. Woodley placed her hand on Vai's shoulder. 'you don't need to think that. Anyway you're not really refugees. No one's out to get you. Really, you're survival migrants, so we can keep you here for another decade. Maybe more.'" (Ch.3)

For the twenty thousand people of Independence, this decision is a severe blow. The shift in perception from that of a 'refugee' to that of 'survival migrants' is palpable, and it provides fuel to the arguments that there is no emergency impacting their lives. They are now denied a chance to flee the increasingly hostile conditions of their homeland to New Zealand, despite having long promised that New Zealand would be a haven for the Pacific Islander people in the event of a natural calamity.

Murry also portrays a scenario in which the islanders are torn between choices: a fervent desire for a stable environment with their historical links to their land and an emerging climate catastrophe that forces them to flee the land of their

ancestors. Their extended stay on the island not only makes their plight more severe, but it also highlights the larger worldwide problem of displacement brought on by climate change, as their existence is unsustainable. The denial of their request to relocate to New Zealand reveals the disparities and inconveniences experienced by marginalized people, reinforcing the urgent need for a more humane and efficient international response to climate refugees. This situation is a prime example of the difficulties tiny island nations and their citizens confront, as they are frequently forced to consider migration due to limited options brought on by climate change, and, compounding that, they are politically marginalized.

Symbol of Social and Political Injustice

Jeff Murray establishes Vai's island Independence as a striking symbol of social and political injustice, laying bare the unequal and exclusionary structures that govern global responses to the climate crisis. When the island of Independence is suffering from escalating climate disasters, it represents countless vulnerable nations on the frontlines of environmental collapse, nations that contribute the least to global emissions yet face the gravest consequences.

Through Vai's fights to ensure a future for her people, Murray foregrounds a reality as to how geopolitical bias and systematic negligence decide who deserves to be rescued. The text depicts a harsh strategy where the islanders of Independence have to wait till the island becomes totally uninhabitable.

Woodley placed her hand on Vai's shoulder. "You don't need to think that. Anyway, you're not really refugees. No one's out to get you. Really, you're survival migrants, so we can keep you here for another decade. Maybe more. Another decade? Vai brushed Woodley's hand away." (Ch.3)

This conditional compassion reflects how international bodies often operate with bureaucratic detachment, failing to protect lives until it is too late. When Vai Shuster moves to Auckland to visit the Adjustment Office and discuss her community's settlement, she is advised to secure an option for Independence's future in New Zealand. However, it is clarified that the people of Independence are not considered climate refugees but rather "survival migrants."

Vai was also informed that many of the countries are already on a waiting list seeking refuge in New Zealand, and despite the severity of the challenges facing Independence, it is not regarded as a special case. The Adjustment Office highlights the deep social and political injustices surrounding climate migration.

“Vai had plenty of time to observe the waiting room of the Adjustment Office, which was a sorting pen for advocates of nations that were sinking or burning.” (Ch.5)

Relating the Adjustment Office's waiting area to a "sorting pen," Murray presents the dehumanization of climate migrants by turning entire populations into numbers and categories. Vai's emotional demand for a safe and sustainable resettlement is later disregarded, and she is presented with inadequate, unlivable options, revealing an ecosystem that is politically geared to exclude rather than support devastated communities.

The denial of islanders' access to Hamilton and other locations that are only available to the wealthy and politically connected reveals how privilege, not justice, is used to manage climate displacement. Vai says that the government's strategy seems like a planned, almost cunning trap. In response, Miriama Hunter, the leader of the nation's real estate firm, confirms the worst nightmare.

“Yes, the policy is a disgrace. It's a capitulation to failure.” Miriama took a sip of her wine. “We're telling the failing countries, “Sorry, no room.”(Ch.7)

It depicts how migrants from powerful countries are prioritized, while small island nations are told, “Sorry, no room,” encapsulating the deep-rooted inequality and lack of humanity in global migration politics. Murray uses Independence Island to showcase that the crisis is not only climate change but also deep-seated political biases faced by the climate refugees after the crisis.

The island becomes a metaphor for the silenced and invisible, a place abandoned by the very systems that promise humanitarian aid, and Vai Shuster struggles to become the voice for the silenced community. Vai learns that refugees have overcrowded parts of New Zealand, sparking discrimination and xenophobia, where the locals derogatorily call them ‘lice.’

“Just dealing with some lice,’ one called out. The others raised their heads up and laughed, but they could just as easily have howled. *Lice*. Vai was familiar with the term and looked at Leon in horror, crouching in tighter against him.” (Ch.8)

Leon, Vai's cousin in New Zealand, casually admits he's involved in the climate migration effort for money, while others in his group are determined to stop more migrants from entering. This depicts the growing indifference to human suffering after the crisis. It also reflects a larger system where the migration of climate refugees

is not perceived as a humanitarian issue but as a logistical and economic challenge that needs to be addressed.

Leon informs Vai that she is welcome in New Zealand because she is Pasifika, but he also backs measures to restrict additional refugee immigration, placing himself in line with a national mindset that prioritizes border security over human safety. Some unscrupulous elements are corrupt and admit those who bribe them. Leon confesses that many people want to migrate to New Zealand as they find the climate favorable, and the logical end is that migrants are welcome and not refugees.

Adaptation and hopeful future

Vai Shuster persistently seeks a viable settlement for her island community, but the decision of the Adjustment Office and New Zealand's dismissive attitude towards the people of Independence compelled Vai to seek alternative options for her community's survival. Vai eventually learns that powerful nations such as China, India, and the USA are competing to stake claims in a melting Antarctica, viewing it as the last frontier for expansion. Through Miriama, a knowledgeable property developer, Vai learns more about China's settlement plans in Antarctica and decides to join with them to secure a future for her people, at least there.

But Miriama remains optimistic, envisioning a utopian future in her native New Zealand, which stands in contrast to Vai's encounter with New Zealand's reception of the islanders, which is no doubt a harsh reality. As Vai desperately tries to secure a future for her community, Adam Walker, the prime minister's advisor, who illegally sells land to foreign powers, forces Vai into an act of survival-driven action.

Miriama envisions an international city in southern New Zealand as a gateway to Antarctica, believing Beijing will become the Chinese Antarctic capital. Her actions are insufficient because of the larger inability to address climate change, even though she intends to assist Vai and her island community. "What we need to do is trying something new—and Antarctica provides that opportunity." (Ch.26) But Adam Walker, on the other side, prioritizes power acquisition over meeting the actual needs of vulnerable communities like Independence. He illegally sells habitable land to the Japanese, showing the absence of legal protections for the displaced population, so the refugees like Vai Shuster and her island people had to adapt to the new settlement plans

Refusing to depend on ambiguous assurances, Vai decides to start again close to an Antarctic volcano where tunnel houses provide shelter and geothermal energy sustains crops. "She names the settlement Independence," she says. "This is our land! This is Independence! She laughed loudly into the wild mountains." (Ch 32) Through

Vai's journey, Murray conveys deep inequalities faced by climate refugees but ultimately offers a vision of adaptation, resilience, and hope.

Conclusion

Jeff Murray's *Melt* goes beyond the boundaries of a conventional climate fiction narrative by interconnecting the looming threat of climate catastrophe with deeply human experiences of displacement, survival, and resilience. While the climate crisis provides the text's urgent backdrop, it is the portrayal of refugee challenges, both physical and emotional, that lends the story its compelling human dimension.

Murray criticizes the way that migration brought on by climate change contributes to social and political injustices experienced by the most marginalized populations, like Independence Island. Antarctica, initially perceived as a safe haven in *Melt*, soon reveals itself to be a problematic refuge. As settlements expand, they trigger geopolitical tensions and competition among nations, exposing the fragility of international cooperation.

Jeff Murray emphasizes how climate migration of the refugees does not exist in a vacuum but instead reinforces existing global power imbalances and deep-rooted injustices shown to climate refugees of the vulnerable community, like Independence. Through Vai, the novel offers a vision of hope and renewal, even while projecting a fragmented and unjust world.

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