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CLIMATE CHANGE RISK NARRATIVES IN SCIENCE AND FICTION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF IPCC REPORTS AND ELIF SHAFAK'S *HE ARE THE PEOPLE*

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ABSTRACT

Climate change has become a pervasive systemic risk on a global scale, posing significant challenges to conventional modes of understanding and governance. Scientific assessments, particularly those produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), frame climate risk through data-driven approaches. However, these assessments often encounter challenges in articulating the lived experiences and moral imperatives associated with the imminent threat of climate-related catastrophes. This article investigates how Elif Shafak's climate fiction *He Are the People* functions as a risk narrative, examining its portrayal of climate-induced societal collapse concerning the risk concepts articulated in IPCC reports. Drawing upon Ulrich Beck's theory of the "risk society" and insights from the environmental humanities, this study analyzes the narrative's depiction of climate risks alongside scientific projections. The comparative analysis demonstrates that Shafak's narrative aligns with scientific assessments concerning critical threats but further enhances this understanding by humanizing and dramatizing the anticipation of catastrophe. This portrayal underscores the psychological, cultural, and ethical dimensions that quantitative reports often fail to encapsulate. The narrative serves as an effective risk communication tool, transforming abstract data into tangible human experiences and thereby enhancing risk perception and facilitating emotional engagement. This article contends that risk narratives of this nature are crucial complements to established scientific discourse, enriching our collective understanding of climate change by embedding it within a framework of lived experiences and moral contexts. This

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interdisciplinary approach underscores the essential role of narrative in the effective communication and confrontation of global climate risks.

Keywords: Climate Change Science, Cli-fi, Risk Narrative, Risk Society, Environmental Humanities

BİLİM VE KURGUDA İKLİM DEĞİŞİKLİĞİ RİSKANLATILARI: IPCC RAPORLARI VE ELİF ŞAFAK'IN *HE ARE THE PEOPLE* HİKAYESİNİN KARŞILAŞTIRMALI ANALİZİ

ÖZ

İklim değişikliği, geleneksel anlayış ve yönetişim biçimlerini zorlayan sistemik ve küresel bir risk olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Hükümetlerarası İklim Değişikliği Paneli (IPCC) tarafından hazırlanan raporlar gibi bilimsel değerlendirmeler, iklim riskini veri odaklı çerçevelerle kavramsallaştırsa da yaklaşan felaketlerin yaşanmış deneyimini ve ahlaki aciliyetini aktarmakta yetersiz kalmaktadır. Bu makale, Elif Şafak'ın *He Are the People* adlı kısa öyküsünü bir risk anlatısı olarak incelemekte ve öyküde betimlenen iklim kaynaklı toplumsal çöküşü IPCC raporlarındaki risk kavramlarıyla karşılaştırmaktadır. Ulrich Beck'in "risk toplumu" kuramı ve çevreci beşeri bilimler alanındaki çalışmalardan yararlanarak yapılan çözümleme, öykünün iklim risklerini bilimsel projeksiyonlarla paralel biçimde ele aldığını, ancak bunun ötesine geçerek yaklaşan felaketin psikolojik, kültürel ve etik boyutlarını da insanileştirerek dramatize ettiğini göstermektedir. Şafak'ın anlatısı, soyut verileri somut bir insan hikâyesine dönüştürerek risk algısını güçlendirmekte ve duygusal bağ kurmayı mümkün kılmaktadır. Makalede, bu tür risk anlatılarının bilimsel söyleme önemli bir katkı sunduğu, iklim değişikliği olgusunu yaşanmış deneyim ve ahlaki bağlam içine yerleştirerek daha bütüncül bir anlayış geliştirdiği sonucuna varılmaktadır. Bu disiplinlerarası yaklaşım, küresel iklim risklerinin anlatı yoluyla iletilmesinin ve kavranmasının önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İklim Değişikliği Bilimi, İklim Kurgu, Risk Anlatısı, Risk Toplumu, Çevreci Beşeri Bilimler.

1. INTRODUCTION

Risk is a fundamental condition of modern society, influencing how communities develop, make decisions, and confront uncertainties. In earlier eras, many risks—such as natural disasters or economic failures—were local in scope. Today, however, we live in what Ulrich Beck (1992) famously termed the "risk society," wherein hazards are increasingly global and interconnected. Among the most critical and existential risks of the 21st century is climate change, which represents a paradigm shift in both scale and complexity. Climate change is not a single, isolated threat, but a systemic

phenomenon that unfolds across ecosystems and borders, disrupting weather patterns, economies, and political stability on a global scale. Unlike contained crises that can be managed with local measures, climate change brings multifaceted, cascading risks that challenge the very frameworks by which societies understand and govern risk (Beck, 2009b, pp. 19–20, 52–53). For Beck, "[l]iving in world risk society means living with ineradicable non-knowing [*Nichtwissen*] or, to be more precise, with the simultaneity of threats and non-knowing and the resulting political, social and moral paradoxes and dilemmas" (Beck, 2009b, p.115). This "ineradicable non-knowing" entails living with "latent side effects" (Beck, 1992, pp. 19,34), in which our basic economic, political, and social processes incessantly spawn new risks, which he describes as "manufactured uncertainties" (Beck, 2009a, p.6).

Scientific institutions have developed rigorous methods to assess and project climate risks. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), for example, defines climate risk as the potential for adverse consequences for human or ecological systems, arising from the interaction of climate-related hazards with the exposure and vulnerability of societies (Reisinger et al., 2020, p.6). This formulation highlights that climate risk is not determined solely by environmental forces; it also depends on social factors—namely, who or what is exposed to those forces and how susceptible they are to harm. Thus, issues of inequality, governance, and adaptive capacity are central to understanding risk (International Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023). IPCC's reports detail how rising global temperatures increase the likelihood of extreme events (hazards), which in turn pose greater dangers to communities that lack resources or resilience (high vulnerability and exposure). For instance, low-lying coastal populations face heightened risk from sea-level rise, and politically unstable or poor regions are often least equipped to cope with droughts or floods. In this way, the scientific discourse frames climate change as both an environmental and a socio-political risk: a threat multiplier that can exacerbate food insecurity, conflict, and displacement on a massive scale. In "Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change," climate change is defined as a "risk multiplier" (Cisse et al., 2022, p. 1128): projected future risks under climate change are "negative effects on subjective well-being" (Cissé et al., 2022, p. 1078) such as stress and anxiety, wide-scale forced migration and involuntary displacement, , the potential for civil unrest and conflict, food insecurity, water scarcity, ecosystem fragility, species extinction (Cissé et al., 2022, p. 1128).

However, while scientific assessments are indispensable for identifying and quantifying these threats, they often struggle to convey what living through such risks actually means for individuals and communities. Reports filled with statistics, graphs, and probabilistic models, however

accurate, may fail to capture the human experience of climate change—the anxiety of an uncertain future, the moral dilemmas in a crisis, or the trauma of losing one's home and livelihood. As Ulrich Beck (2009b, p.1) observes, modern society is increasingly preoccupied with the anticipation of catastrophe; we are governed not just by what has happened, but by what we fear might happen. This anticipatory outlook is inherently psychological and cultural. It suggests that understanding climate risk is not only a technical matter of emissions scenarios and adaptation strategies, but also a narrative challenge: how do we imagine and communicate the potential for catastrophe before it fully strikes?

In recent years, literature—especially climate fiction or "cli-fi"—has emerged as a key arena for exploring these questions. Climate fiction writers integrate scientific facts and predictions into storylines that make abstract risks concrete and emotionally resonant. By crafting scenarios in which characters must navigate climate-induced crises, such works translate data into lived reality. They can illustrate, for example, how a statistic about water scarcity might unfold as a daily struggle for a family, or how a projection of mass migration might feel for both refugees and the communities that receive them. Such narratives can personalize the statistical and give form to the "slow violence" of climate change that often escapes immediate perception (Heise, 2008). In doing so, they provide a complementary form of knowledge to scientific reports—one grounded in empathy, moral inquiry, and cultural context.

This article examines Elif Shafak's short story *He Are the People*[1] (2019) as a climate risk narrative and compares its content and approach to those of the IPCC reports. *He Are the People* is a dystopian, cli-fi story set in a near-future Istanbul devastated by climate change. It portrays a society where water has become a scarce commodity, and refugees are used as bargaining chips in international agreements. By analyzing this story alongside scientific and sociological concepts of risk, the study explores how fiction and science each address the challenges of climate change. The central argument is that Shafak's narrative not only mirrors many risks identified by climate science, such as resource scarcity, displacement, and governance breakdown, but also extends beyond the scope of scientific reports by vividly depicting the human and ethical dimensions of those risks. In other words, the story serves as a compelling risk narrative that bridges the gap between quantitative risk assessment and qualitative human experience.

[1] Elif Shafak has not produced any works that explicitly engage with the genre of climate fiction. While some critics classify her 2021 novel, *The Island of Missing Trees*, as belonging to this genre, it fails to address several key criteria that define effective climate fiction and does not satisfactorily operate as a risk narrative.

To support this argument, the paper is organized as follows. First, a literature review outlines the academic context: Beck's sociological theory of global risk, the IPCC's risk framework, and perspectives from environmental humanities on narrative and risk. Next, the comparative analysis examines points of convergence and divergence between the IPCC's depiction of climate risks and Shafak's fictional portrayal. Following this, the study delves into the narrative strategies and thematic elements that make *He Are the People* a powerful risk narrative, emphasizing how it engages readers emotionally and culturally. A discussion section then considers the broader implications of integrating literary narratives with scientific discourse in understanding and communicating climate change. Finally, the conclusion reflects on what Shafak's story teaches us about the nature of climate risk and the value of storytelling in an age of impending climate catastrophe.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Risk Society: Global Hazards and Manufactured Uncertainties

Modern society's relationship with risk has been profoundly brought into focus by the work of Ulrich Beck. In *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Beck (1992) argues that we have transitioned from an industrial era, focused on wealth creation and the distribution of "goods" to a new era preoccupied with the distribution of "bads," i.e., risks. Industrial development, technological progress, and globalization have generated hazards that are often invisible, delayed in their effects, but massively dangerous (e.g., radiation, pollutants, greenhouse gases) (Beck, 1992, pp. 12, 35). These risks are primarily manufactured uncertainties, side effects of modernization itself (Beck, 2009b, p.8). A defining feature of what Beck calls the world risk society is that risks are no longer confined by geography or social class. In previous centuries, disasters might have been local, and the wealthy could shield themselves from many dangers (Beck, 1992, p.22). Today, however, phenomena like nuclear fallout or climate change cross national boundaries and, in theory, threaten rich and poor alike. Beck encapsulated this idea with the provocative phrase: "poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic" (Beck, 1992, p. 36). In other words, everyone will eventually inhale the same polluted air, even if unequal power structures remain.

Despite this claim of a democratizing effect of global risks, Beck's thesis has been critiqued for understating how unevenly distributed many risks still are. Later analyses have pointed out that the wealthy and powerful often find ways to externalize or escape dangers, while the poor are left more exposed (Curran, 2018, p.31). Climate change exemplifies this inequality: the nations and communities least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions are frequently the most vulnerable to climate impacts, whereas affluent groups can deploy resources to buffer themselves, to a degree, from the worst consequences. Beck himself acknowledged such disparities and continually

refined his theory. He distinguished between risk and catastrophe, emphasizing that risk is essentially about "the anticipation of future catastrophe" — before any actual disaster has occurred (Beck, 2009a, p.3). Once a disastrous event occurs, such as a major flood or lethal heatwave, it is no longer a risk but a reality. Modern society, according to Beck (1992, 2009b), lives in a state of permanent anticipation: governments and individuals alike are organizing their lives around the prediction and prevention of potential catastrophes that loom on the horizon. This forward-looking, precautionary stance is a hallmark of the climate change era, where we take actions (or fail to) based on projected futures.

In a later work, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016), Beck adopted a somewhat more optimistic tone, suggesting that global recognition of risks such as climate change could lead to a fundamental transformation or metamorphosis of our social and political order. He envisioned that confronting climate risk might spur new forms of cooperation and cosmopolitan governance, effectively forcing societies into progressive change (Beck, 2016, p. 35). However, events in the real world have complicated this optimism. Political developments such as the rise of nationalist movements and the withdrawal of some governments from international climate agreements have illustrated that shared risk does not automatically produce shared responsibility. Bruno Latour (2018, pp. 17-21) argued that we have entered a "new climatic regime" characterized by greater inequality and fragmentation, rather than unity: even as climate pressures intensify, nations turn inward, and elites fortify themselves. Similarly, journalist-geographer Todd Miller's (2017) investigation in *Storming the Wall* documents how wealthier countries respond to climate-induced migration not with solidarity, but with militarized borders and securitization. These observations reinforce that Beck's (1992, p.36) "smog is democratic" idea has limits—global risks are universal in scope, but their impacts still map onto existing inequities of power and wealth.

This tension between global shared risk and unequal vulnerability is directly relevant to Shafak's fictional scenario, which envisions an authoritarian government exploiting a climate crisis to consolidate power and protect the privileged. Beck's concept of living in an "age of side effects" and being preoccupied with future catastrophes provides a valuable lens for reading. Shafak (2019) organizes the society in the story entirely around managing the catastrophic prospect of running out of water. At the same time, the story vividly illustrates what Ulrich Beck and others have noted—that even in a universal crisis, the burdens and fears are not experienced equally by all. The wealthy in Shafak's future Türkiye form plans to escape the planet entirely, while the poor barter human lives for water. In sum, Beck's risk society theory establishes a framework for understanding climate change as a new kind of risk —global, manufactured, and anticipatory —and it raises

questions about how such risk is distributed, questions that the story interrogates in narrative form.

2.2. Climate Change Risk in Scientific Assessment: The IPCC Framework

The 'core' definition of risk is "the potential for adverse consequences" (IPCC Sixth Assessment Report; Reisinger et al., 2020, p. 5); Risk in IPCC use applies only to "human or ecological systems" (Reisinger et al., 2020, p. 6). Scientific assessments of climate change, epitomized by the IPCC, formalize the understanding of risk in terms of measurable components. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) defines risk as "the potential for adverse consequences for human or ecological systems" in a changing climate (Reisinger et al., 2020, p. 5). In this framework, risk results from a combination of three factors: hazards (the physical events or trends, such as droughts, heatwaves, sea-level rise), exposure (the presence of people, assets, or ecosystems in harm's way), and vulnerability (the susceptibility of those exposed elements to harm, based on factors like sensitivity and adaptive capacity) (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC)], 2023). Climate change is seen as intensifying hazards (for example, making droughts more frequent and severe) and often increasing exposure (more people living in coastal cities, for instance), while vulnerability varies with socioeconomic conditions. A wealthy, well-prepared city might be less vulnerable to the same hazard that would devastate a poorer, unprepared community.

Notably, the IPCC emphasizes that climate risks arise not only from the direct impacts of environmental changes but also from human responses to those changes (Reisinger et al., 2020, pp. 6–7). This means that policies and actions (or inaction) can themselves create new risks or exacerbate existing ones. For example, if a government reacts to water scarcity by hoarding resources or neglecting certain regions, it can turn a climate hazard into a broader social catastrophe. Conversely, well-planned adaptation measures can reduce risk. This view aligns with Beck's notion that risk is socially constructed as much as it is objective: how society is organized will determine how climate hazards translate into outcomes.

The IPCC reports also deal explicitly with uncertainty and the challenge of communicating it. They present ranges of possible futures (scenarios) and assign confidence levels to predictions. While scientifically essential, this probabilistic language can dilute the sense of urgency; a 50% chance of a catastrophe in 2070 may not viscerally alarm the public or policymakers. The reports are written in technical prose for a broad international audience, which can make them abstract. As a result, there is often a gap between knowledge and feeling: people may know the scientific facts about climate risks but still feel disconnected from them. This is where

literature can play a crucial role, by taking the same information and embedding it into stories that evoke an emotional and moral response.

It is important to note that the IPCC's perspective on risk tends to be problem-solving and policy-oriented. Climate risk is portrayed as something that can be managed through collective action: for instance, by cutting greenhouse gas emissions to reduce hazards, by building flood defences to reduce exposure, or by improving socioeconomic conditions to reduce vulnerability. The underlying assumption is that with better knowledge (science) and better governance, we can mitigate or adapt to risks. The IPCC's stance is often inherently technocratic and optimistic about our ability to avert worst-case outcomes through planning (IPCC, 2023). However, it also acknowledges grave concerns, such as tipping points and the limits of adaptation, which imply that beyond a certain threshold of warming, catastrophic outcomes might be unavoidable. The reports highlight potential scenarios such as large-scale migration driven by climate change, conflicts arising from resource scarcity, and failure of state mechanisms. These risks extend beyond the environmental sphere and pose significant threats to social stability. The reports delineate potential scenarios including extensive climate-induced migration, conflicts resulting from resource scarcity, and the disintegration of state structures. These risks transcend the environmental domain and pose substantial challenges to social stability.

When comparing this scientific framework to Shafak's *He Are the People*, one can see that the story's premise is essentially a realization of some of the IPCC's darker projections. The narrative takes place in a world where insufficient action has led to severe hazards (chronic drought), extreme exposure (an entire region starved of water), and acute vulnerability (governance failures and inequality have left people at the mercy of catastrophe). In a sense, the story could be viewed as an imaginative case study of what happens when the IPCC's warnings are not heeded. It dramatizes how climate change shifts from a risk to a lived catastrophe, and in doing so, it underscores aspects that data tables and graphs cannot easily convey, such as the moral compromises people might make under duress, or how a government might twist a crisis to tighten its grip on power.

2.3. Narrative and the Perception of Risk: Insights from Environmental Humanities

While sociology and science provide conceptual and analytical tools for understanding climate risk, scholars in the environmental humanities argue that storytelling is equally crucial to how societies comprehend and respond to threats. Ursula K. Heise (2008, p. 206) contends that climate change challenges our traditional narrative frameworks. In Sense *of Place and Sense of Planet*, Heise (2008, pp. 206, 208-209) notes that environmental crises unfold over long timescales and vast geographic scopes, which makes them

difficult to represent in familiar story forms that focus on individual characters and immediate events. Climate change, for example, is a form of "slow violence" that accumulates gradually and often invisibly—glaciers melt, sea levels rise, and species slowly become extinct (Nixon, 2011, pp. 6-10). These processes do not fit neatly into a dramatic arc yet portend catastrophic outcomes. Heise argues that to make sense of such diffuse risks, we need new narrative strategies that embrace global interconnection and long-term thinking. Heise (2008, 59-63) advocates for an "eco-cosmopolitan" narrative vision that connects local experiences to planetary-scale processes, enabling readers and audiences to envision themselves as part of a global ecological community. In effect, Heise highlights that risk is not just a scientific statistic but a cultural narrative: the stories we tell about risk (apocalypse or salvation, justice or tragedy) shape our collective response to it.

One key point Heise (2008) makes is that the way climate risks are framed—through metaphors, storylines, and images—will influence whether people feel a sense of urgency or indifference. For instance, framing climate change as a slow, long-term risk can lead to complacency (the so-called "Giddens's Paradox," where future threats do not provoke action today), whereas framing it in terms of immediate dangers or personal stories can trigger engagement. To break this impasse, Heise (2008, pp. 206-209) highlights the narrative challenge of scale mismatch: climate stories must braid micro-events—such as a coastal family's well turning brackish as sea levels seep inland—with macro-processes like polar ice loss, so that readers intuit how the two levels co-produce risk. Literary works can therefore be seen as laboratories for risk perception, as they experiment with different ways of making the audience feel the weight of climatic threats.

Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017) builds on this idea by examining the emotional and cognitive impact of climate fiction. In "Cli-fi and the Feeling of Risk", Weik von Mossner (2017) suggests that fiction serves as a crucial space to explore the affective dimension of climate risk. Unlike scientific reports, which are constrained by objectivity, fiction can engage the reader's empathy and imagination. It can ask, "What would it be like to live in a world transformed by climate change?" and answers viscerally. Weik von Mossner (2017) observes that many climate fiction narratives are essentially risk narratives: they revolve around characters anticipating, experiencing, or reacting to climate-related disasters. By placing readers in the shoes of those characters, stories can evoke feelings of fear, hope, despair, or resolve—emotions that are fundamental to how people perceive and manage risk. In the context of climate change, where motivating public action is a constant challenge, such emotional engagement is not ancillary; it is pivotal.

Sylvia Mayer (2020) examines the intersection of environmental risk, literature, and ecocriticism, tracing how fiction participates in broader

environmental risk discourses. Mayer argues that while ecocriticism has traditionally focused on environmental crises, its engagement with risk theory and risk narratives has expanded significantly in recent years. This shift allows literary and cultural studies to analyze risk perception, uncertainty, and decision-making processes in fictional texts (Mayer, 2020, p. 148). She discusses how literary narratives contribute to the understanding of environmental risks, particularly within the context of climate change fiction (cli-fi) and the Anthropocene. Mayer's study highlights the importance of risk fiction in shaping public awareness of threats that are not yet fully realized but are scientifically predicted, such as climate catastrophes and species extinction. Drawing from Ulrich Beck, she emphasizes how modern societies are increasingly defined by "risk cultures" and the "world risk society." Mayer applies this sociological insight to literary studies, suggesting that fiction serves as a key medium for exploring and communicating risk perceptions (Mayer, 2020, p. 148). Referencing various works in Anglophone cli-fi and environmental risk fiction, analyzing how they depict scenarios of threat, instability, and planetary crisis (Mayer, 2020, p. 149), she concludes that environmental risk fiction offers a critical lens for understanding contemporary anxieties about climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological collapse. Ultimately, Mayer positions fiction as a powerful tool for engaging with the uncertainties and ethical dilemmas of the Anthropocene: Showing how environmental risk fiction in particular communicates experiences of uncertainty, instability, and transformation makes the experience of the world risk society concrete and emotionally significant, and it provides essential knowledge that complements the knowledge communicated by the still better-known risk scenarios developed by the social and natural sciences (Mayer, 2020, p. 150). In *The Anticipation of Catastrophe*, Mayer (2014, p. 23) explains that climate change fiction's "essentially infinite imaginative and formal range" allows it to "explore the complexity and diversity of individual and collective risk experience" in ways that are based on scientific projections and at the same time transcend them.

The literature from environmental humanities suggests that to fully grapple with climate risk, we must consider the stories and cultural narratives that lend meaning to risk. Climate fiction like Shafak's is not merely illustrative; it actively shapes the discourse by reframing scientific "facts" into human-centered scenarios. As this study will show, Shafak (2019) merges the planetary perspective highlighted by Heise (2008), connecting local lives to global crises with the emotional urgency emphasized by Weik von Mossner: "It can help us to *imaginatively experience* the impact of that geophysical force that is the human" (Weik von Mossner, 2017, p. 132; emphasis original). It thereby stands as a poignant example of how narrative can enhance our collective understanding of climate change risks, complementing the work of scientists and policymakers with the work of imagination and empathy.

3. Discussion

3.1. Alignment and Divergence: *He Are the People* and IPCC Risk Assessments

Elif Shafak's *He Are the People* paints a future that in many ways mirrors the projections and warnings found in IPCC assessments. At its core, the story grapples with the same equation that the IPCC uses to describe risk: perilous hazards (in this case, extreme water scarcity and ecosystem collapse) intersect with acute vulnerabilities (political instability, social inequity, and poverty) and widespread exposure (an entire nation's population) to produce a catastrophic scenario. The climate hazard driving the plot is an intense drought in Türkiye around the year 2040, an outcome consistent with scientific predictions for increased frequency and severity of droughts in the Mediterranean region under climate change. This drought has made water more precious than oil —a situation the IPCC has cautioned could occur in arid and semi-arid regions as global temperatures rise and precipitation patterns shift. The story's premise that water becomes a currency and a tool of power aligns with scientific concerns that resource scarcity can destabilize societies. IPCC reports have explicitly warned that climate change will likely lead to resource conflicts and migration crises (IPCC, 2023), and Shafak's narrative takes this warning to its dystopian extreme.

One of the starkest parallels is the treatment of climate-induced migration. The IPCC has identified large-scale human displacement as a major risk in scenarios of severe climate impacts, noting that millions could be forced to move due to sea-level rise, desertification, or extreme weather, thereby straining social and political systems (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2018, pp. 235-244). In *He Are the People* (Shafak, 2019), this future has arrived: Turkey is inundated with refugees fleeing even worse conditions elsewhere, and migration is the central political issue. The government's response in the story—making a deal to stop refugees from reaching Europe in exchange for water—echoes real-world arrangements such as agreements between the EU and Turkey to contain refugees, or proposals to trade resources for migration control: "In return for each refugee we did not send to Europe, though we surely could anytime, we received a barrel of water from Europe" (Shafak, 2019, p. 96). This presents a convergence with scientific risk assessments in that both recognize migration as a nexus of climate risk and geopolitical tension. However, the story diverges from the dry language of reports by illustrating what such a policy means on the ground. The refugees in Shafak's tale are not numbers; they are people crammed into slums, hidden in neighbors' basements, and living in fear of deportation. The IPCC might tell us that climate change will increase migration pressures, but Shafak (2019) shows us the human faces of that statistic and forces the reader to confront the ethical implications.

The power dynamics in the story also reflect and critique the notion of risk distribution. The IPCC and Beck both emphasize that vulnerability is often higher in marginalized communities. Shafak's narrative underscores this by depicting a Türkiye, where inequality has been magnified by climate stress. On one hand, the general population is suffering: ordinary citizens line up for rationed water, and basic survival has become precarious. On the other hand, the ruling elite and the super-rich find ways to shield themselves. In a particularly striking element, the wealthiest individuals form "an international alliance to plan their escape to another planet," (Shafak, 2019, p. 92) effectively opting out of the crisis entirely. This plot point satirizes the real idea of climate refuges for the rich (such as luxury bunkers or purchasing land in safer climates) and aligns with Bruno Latour's (2018) observation of elites disconnecting from the plight of the many. It also dramatizes the critique by Curran (2018, p.34) that risk is not as democratic as Beck's early work suggested. In Shafak's future, the wealthy are a nation of their own, literally leaving the rest of humanity behind. This scenario extends the IPCC's discussion of "adaptation limits" and "maladaptive responses" into the realm of moral hazard: those with means choose a radical form of adaptation, namely escape, that abandons any pretense of a collective solution: "The wealthy were a nation of their own. With injections and supplements and pesticide-free diets, none of which were available to the public, they were determined to live two hundred years—but first they had to get away from here, away from us" (Shafak, 2019, p. 92).

Conversely, *He Are the People* also amplifies issues that the IPCC outlines only in broad terms. The IPCC reports discuss the risk of authoritarian or illiberal shifts under the stress of climate impacts (for example, states of emergency that could curtail rights, or the use of climate disasters by leaders to consolidate power) (Cissé, 2022, pp. 1086-1102). Shafak's story illustrates exactly such a shift. The government in the story, personified by a leader who renames himself WeAreThePeople, uses the "Extreme Extended Climate Emergency" (Shafak, 2019, p. 94) as justification to dissolve democratic institutions and demand absolute authority. The government's monopoly over water access enables it to consolidate power, ensuring resource distribution is tied to loyalty and compliance. Those who oppose the system face severe consequences, reinforcing a culture of fear and submission. The narrative critiques how governments, rather than addressing the root causes of the climate crisis, exploit them as opportunities to enforce stricter control and eliminate dissent. The population is told that this authoritarian arrangement—"WeAreThePeople" ruling over "ThePresident" (the ironic term used for the people themselves)—is benevolent and necessary. (Shafak, 2019, p. 94). This resonates with real fears that climate emergencies could lead to "eco-fascism" or other forms of draconian rule, where the guise of protecting the nation from climate threats becomes an excuse to suppress dissent and minority rights. The

IPCC does not delve into political theory. However, it does note that effective climate action requires good governance and that conflict and instability are risks when institutions fail to manage crises (Cissé, 2022, p. 1128). Shafak's narrative takes this a step further by portraying a failed governance outcome: a regime that not only fails to protect its citizens but actively perpetrates harm by exploiting the crisis, trading refugees for water, surveilling and punishing those who show compassion.

In terms of risk communication, the difference between the IPCC's style and Shafak's story is pronounced. For example, an IPCC report might state: "Prolonged drought, in conjunction with governance challenges, can lead to heightened conflict over resources and displacement of populations" (Caretta, 2022, p. 578). *He Are the People* translates that sentence into a lived reality: "In return for each refugee we did not send to Europe… we received a barrel of water," the narrator recounts the official policy (Shafak, 2019, p. 96). This single line of dialogue carries enormous weight: it reveals a government treating human lives as bargaining chips, implies the complicity (or desperation) of Europe, and encapsulates the theme that water has become a form of currency. The emotional impact of this narrative detail is far greater than the dry description of a resource-for-migration swap; it shocks the reader's conscience, invoking feelings of horror and indignation. In a similar vein, the story describes the internal conflict of the young protagonist, narrator—Ada, who contemplates betraying a refugee houseguest to the authorities in order to keep his own family safe: "It occurred to me that... I could go to the police and inform them that we were hiding two refugees… No one would know... But as soon as the thought hit me, I felt a burning sense of shame," the narrator confesses (Shafak, 2019, p. 97). This moment brings to life the moral risk and psychological strain that do not appear in any IPCC assessment yet are an integral part of what living through a climate crisis would entail. It highlights how risk on paper, danger of punishment for aiding refugees, becomes ethical agony in practice.

He Are the People aligns closely with IPCC findings in identifying the multi-dimensional nature of climate risk: environmental hazard (drought) entangled with social issues: migration, inequality, political upheaval, food insecurity. The story validates the scientific consensus that climate change can and will destabilize societies if left unchecked. However, it diverges by focusing on the granular human and political realities that the IPCC, by its nature, can only generalize. Shafak's fiction fills in the blanks of the official reports — it imagines how exactly those cascading failures might play out, who suffers, who gains, and what extreme measures people might resort to. In doing so, it offers a narrative form of risk assessment not found in technical documents: a bottom-up, inside-out perspective of a world under climate siege. This comparison reveals that while the scientific and fictional accounts

are in dialogue about the same future, the story delivers an experiential truth to complement the empirical truth of the reports.

3.2. *He Are The People* as an Effective Climate Risk Narrative

Beyond aligning with specific risk scenarios, *He Are the People* stands out for how effectively it communicates the feeling and complexity of living in a climate-changed world. The story condenses a host of climate-related issues—drought, refugees, nationalism, inequality, technological escape—into a tight narrative that is both locally grounded and globally relevant. Several narrative strategies and elements contribute to its power as a risk narrative: To begin with, risk is personalized through character perspectives. The story is told through the eyes of a young protagonist in a family spanning three generations. By focusing on a single household, Shafak (2019) makes the immense abstract concept of climate collapse intimate and relatable. We see how a planetary crisis trickles down into a domestic dilemma: a father, mother, child, and grandmother arguing over whether to hide or expel two refugees who have come to them for help. Each family member represents a different response to risk. The father is fearful and pragmatic—he has internalized the state's warnings and wants to avoid danger at all costs, even if it means turning away those in need. The grandmother demonstrates a principled and compassionate character, firmly anchored in the cultural and religious traditions of hospitality and moral obligation. She steadfastly upholds these values in the face of societal disintegration, refusing to relinquish her commitment to them. Granddaughter Ada (the narrator) is caught in between, confused and anxious, their conscience pulled in both directions. Through these characters, the narrative explores ethical risk: the risk to one's values and sense of self when confronted with dire choices. The reader is invited to empathize with each perspective, thereby understanding the weight of risk not just as physical survival, but as a test of integrity and humanity. This emotional engagement is precisely what climate data cannot offer but fiction can. The dread the narrator feels when contemplating betraying the refugees, and the relief and shame when deciding against it, allow the audience to experience the moral stakes of the situation vicariously.

Moreover, cultural context and symbolism serve as significant factors influencing the effectiveness of the narrative. Shafak sets the story in Istanbul, weaving in elements of Turkish culture and contemporary global politics. The grandmother's insistence on helping strangers echoes the deeply ingrained cultural value of hospitality (misafirperverlik in Turkish tradition). This clash between traditional ethics and survivalist realpolitik gives the narrative a rich tension. It shows how climate risk can erode cultural norms and social bonds: a society famed for welcoming guests is now turning refugees away under governmental decree. The regime's names and slogans ("WeAreThePeople" vs. "ThePresident") parody populist rhetoric and hint at real authoritarian

tendencies in the world today, grounding the story's speculative elements in recognizable trends. The very title, He Are the People, is grammatically jarring—it reflects a manipulation of language by those in power, as if echoing broken logic in governance. All of these cultural and linguistic details enhance the story's credibility and resonance. The narrative implies that climate catastrophe does not occur in a vacuum; it amplifies existing social fractures and histories. By being specific to Türkiye and its relationship with Europe, the story avoids the pitfall of vagueness that some dystopias fall into. Instead, it gains authenticity and urgency, suggesting that this future could emerge from our present realities. For a risk narrative, that sense of plausibility is key to its impact on the audience.

Also, through the depiction of interconnected risks, *He Are the People* excels at portraying what scholars call the cascading effect of climate risk. One immediate crisis (water shortage) triggers another (mass migration), which in turn triggers political upheaval, a state of emergency, and loss of democracy, leading to social and moral crises (families torn over whether to follow orders or help neighbors). The story demonstrates how climate change is not a singular event but a catalyst that simultaneously transforms multiple aspects of life. This aligns with the concept of compound risk (Caretta, 2022, p.628) discussed in literature: the idea that environmental, social, and political risks can compound and feed into one another. In the story, an ecological problem becomes a humanitarian problem, which becomes a governance problem. By encapsulating this web of cause-and-effect in narrative form, Shafak (2019) conveys complexity without needing graphs or charts—readers witness it unfolding through plot events.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Shafak's narrative as a risk communication tool is its ability to engage the reader's emotions. Risk, especially climate risk, often fails to provoke action because it feels abstract or overwhelming. *He Are the People* combats this by making the reader care about the characters and invest in their fate. The fear of the father when he hears rumors of informants, the grandmother's quiet defiance as she waters her last herb garden despite shortages, the protagonist's anxiety and guilt—all these create a psychological landscape of life under looming catastrophe. This emotional landscape is as important as the physical one because it influences behavior. The story shows people adapting psychologically: normalizing the absurd (accepting propaganda, rationalizing harsh policies) or conversely, reaching breaking points where they must act according to conscience. It poses hard questions to the reader: "What would you do? Would you turn in a refugee to save your family? Would you comply with an unjust law to avoid punishment? In doing so, the narrative transforms the reader from a distant observer of risk into a participant in its moral evaluation.

In addition to its emotional resonance and cultural grounding, Shafak's narrative distinctly highlights how literary narratives have the unique ability to illuminate ethical dimensions of climate risk, dimensions that quantitative scientific data alone cannot adequately address. A statistic about millions of potential refugees might not spur action, but a story about one family's struggle might spark empathy that scales up to broader concern. Moreover, narrative can illuminate ethical questions in ways that scientific discourse typically does not. *He Are the People* exemplifies this by posing moral dilemmas: Should a family harbor climate refugees at great personal risk? Is it right for a state to treat refugees as currency for trade? These questions resonate with real-world debates about climate justice and humanitarian responsibility, yet they are brought to life in the story's plot. Literary narratives often delve into moral risk—the risk to our values and principles when we are under extreme pressure. This is a dimension of climate change that data can scarcely touch on, but fiction can explore in depth.

The narrative serves as a poignant dystopian cautionary tale, underscoring the importance of societal awareness and engagement. Like much of speculative fiction, it can be interpreted not only as a narrative exploration but also as a substantive exhortation for vigilance against potential future threats. The themes presented reflect broader societal issues and encourage critical reflection on the consequences of inaction in the face of looming dangers. It extrapolates from current issues (climate policy failures, anti-immigrant sentiments, democratic backsliding) to suggest where we might end up if we do not change course. Dystopian storytelling has a long tradition of acting as a societal mirror and prod, and this story falls squarely in that tradition. It warns that failure to address climate change proactively could lead to a world where fundamental human values are inverted—water is worth more than human life, national borders trump basic compassion, and democracy gives way to dictatorship under the stress of survival. The effectiveness of this narrative in spurring reflection comes from how tangible it makes that future feel. It is easier to dismiss an IPCC projection for 2050 than it is to dismiss the crying child or the fearful father in Shafak's story, because the latter elicit empathy. Thus, the story not only entertains or informs; it also implicitly calls for readers to consider what can be done now to avoid such a future. It reinforces the importance of concepts like climate justice and proactive governance that scientific literature advocates, but through a different medium of persuasion.

In evaluating *He Are the People* as a risk narrative, it becomes evident that the story's literary techniques amplify its message. The use of first-person narration creates intimacy. Flashbacks such as memories of the old bazaar full of fruits and herbs, now vanished, evoke a sense of loss and nostalgia for a healthier planet. Symbolism plays a significant role in enhancing the thematic depth of the narrative. The dying herbs of the grandmother symbolize hope

and persistence, while the slogans employed by the government reflect a distorted interpretation of populism. This strategic use of symbolism introduces layers of meaning, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the text's core messages. These are tools unique to narrative fiction that, when well executed, can lodge in the mind of the audience more firmly than bullet points or charts. The story translates the "anticipation of catastrophe"—Beck's definition of risk—into a narrative of ongoing catastrophe experienced in every facet of daily life. In other words, it collapses the distance between present and future, which often hinders climate action. For the characters in the story, the catastrophic future is now. This collapse is a powerful narrative accomplishment, as it confronts the reader with the urgency of climate change in an unfiltered way.

Taken together, the richness of *He Are the People* illustrates why fiction is an indispensable partner to science in the discourse on climate change. Scientific reports tell us what we need to know; stories like Shafak's show us why we should care. By engaging with both, one gains a more holistic understanding of climate risk: intellectually informed and emotionally resonant, globally aware and locally textured, cautionary yet grounded in ethical choices. The ensuing section zooms in on the broader implications of such narratives and how they intersect with scientific knowledge in shaping public perception and policy discussions around climate risk.

The comparative reading of IPCC reports and Elif Shafak's *He Are the People* highlights the value of an interdisciplinary approach to climate risk. Scientific and literary narratives, rather than competing, emerge as complementary ways of knowing. Scientific assessments offer a macro-level analysis, allowing us to understand trends, probabilities, and systemic impacts. They give credibility and urgency to the conversation by establishing that climate change is real and dangerous, quantifying how and where those dangers might unfold. On the other hand, literary narratives operate at a micro and mezzo level, fleshing out what those broad trends might mean for societies, communities, and individuals. They inject the qualitative dimensions—culture, psychology, morality—that numbers alone cannot convey. When we bring these two together, as this article has attempted, we can achieve a more nuanced and compelling communication of climate risk. The science grounds the fiction in plausibility; the fiction infuses the science with poignancy.

One key discussion point is the role of culture and identity in risk narratives. Shafak's story is deeply rooted in a specific cultural context, which demonstrates that climate risk is not experienced in generic ways, but is always filtered through local values, histories, and social structures. In the story, Turkish cultural elements (like hospitality norms and political references) shape characters' responses to the crisis. This suggests that

effective climate risk communication may need to be culturally tailored. A narrative that resonates in one region or community might not have the same impact in another. For instance, *He Are the People* might speak strongly to those familiar with Middle Eastern or Mediterranean socio-political dynamics, or those concerned with refugee issues, whereas a different narrative might be needed to engage audiences elsewhere. This aligns with the IPCC's recognition that vulnerability is context-specific: just as adaptive solutions must be locally appropriate, so too might risk narratives need to connect with local cultural narratives. The implication is that collecting and promoting diverse climate stories from different parts of the world could be a powerful strategy to foster a global understanding of climate risks that still respects regional particularities. Storytelling, in this view, becomes a form of distributed risk communication, with each narrative illuminating the facets of climate change most salient to its context, yet all contributing to a shared planetary awareness.

Another discussion point is what we might call the ethics of risk communication. There is a fine line between raising awareness and inducing despair. Scientific reports often tread carefully, avoiding alarmism, sticking to likelihoods and uncertainties. Fiction is freer to imagine worst-case scenarios, but if those scenarios are too dire, they can also lead to fatalism among readers. Shafak (2019) walks this line by being grim but not entirely devoid of hope: while she shows a society in collapse, she also highlights individual acts of kindness and courage: the family does shelter the refugees, at least for a time, against the directives; the grandmother does persist in nurturing plants and compassion. This nuance is important. It suggests that the most effective risk narratives are not ones that merely hammer in doom, but those that also humanize the struggle and perhaps imply that different choices could have been made to avert the tragedy. In the story, one senses that if the world had acted sooner on climate change or been more humane in its politics, the disaster might not have unfolded this way. Thus, even without a happy ending, the narrative leaves room for readers to think about change and agency. For communicators and educators, the lesson here is to balance honesty about risks with empowering messages. Narratives can inspire action as well as warn; the two are not mutually exclusive.

The interplay between risk narratives and policy is another avenue worth discussing. Stories like Shafak's can have an impact on public discourse and indirectly on policy by shaping how citizens and leaders conceptualize what is at stake. While it is unlikely that a single short story would change government policy, a robust cultural milieu of climate narratives can shift norms and expectations. We have seen historical precedents where literature influenced social movements (for example, how Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin contributed to anti-slavery sentiment). In the context of climate change, a growing corpus of cli-fi is already entering mainstream

awareness, and *He Are the People* is part of that wave. It was published in a collection, McSweeney's *2040 AD*, explicitly aimed at bridging science and art, showing a deliberate effort to engage readers with climate futures. This indicates a strategic use of fiction to support science communication. The discussion could extend to how collaborations between scientists and writers (as in the creation of this story, which reportedly involved consultation with climate experts) represent innovative models for outreach. Could future IPCC reports, for example, include narrative scenarios or fictional vignettes to illustrate their findings? Or might climate fiction authors draw even more directly from scientific data to ensure their stories remain grounded and educational? There is fertile ground at this intersection for developing new methods of conveying risk.

Moreover, analyzing *He Are the People* alongside the IPCC highlights certain oversights or blind spots in each domain that the other helps to fill. Scientific reports seldom address the psychological toll of living under constant threat, whereas the story spends considerable attention on fear, suspicion, and denial as social phenomena. Conversely, the story, focused on a single country, does not explicitly explore international aspects beyond the transactional deal with Europe, while the IPCC provides a global picture. This suggests a complementary use: policymakers might use fiction to stress-test or visualize the implications of their projections (a scenario planning tool), and writers might use scientific findings to lend weight and specificity to their imagined worlds. For academics and educators, pairing a piece of climate fiction with portions of an IPCC report or summaries thereof could be a powerful pedagogical approach, encouraging students to see the links and gaps between the two ways of understanding climate change.

It is imperative to recognize that not all narratives pertaining to climate change contribute constructively or accurately to the discourse. While certain climate fiction may provide valuable insights, there exist narratives that have the potential to mislead audiences. For instance, apocalyptic films frequently emphasize dramatic catastrophic events, often overlooking the complex representational challenges inherent to climate change. Additionally, some fictional works may inadvertently minimize the gravity of the issue. Consequently, critical engagement with these narratives is requisite. In this sense, *He Are the People* exemplifies effective narrative construction, in part because it respects scientific principles and does not contravene plausible scenarios. The work's embellishments, such as the notion of interplanetary escape, function as metaphorical amplifications of real-world trends rather than mere fantasy. This responsible approach to the subject matter is crucial for maintaining credibility within the discourse. As climate narratives proliferate, it becomes increasingly essential to discern those that contribute constructively to public understanding from those that prioritize sensationalism. Encouraging a symbiotic relationship between scientifically

informed fiction and fiction-informed science may serve to maintain this necessary balance in the ongoing conversation surrounding climate change.

Shafak's climate change story exemplifies how blending the quantitative rigor of science with the qualitative richness of storytelling can lead to a more robust appreciation of climate risks. It underscores that dealing with climate change is as much about changing hearts and minds as it is about emissions curves and adaptation plans. The societal transformation required to avert catastrophic climate outcomes will depend on collective will, which in turn is built on shared narratives about our future. We need the IPCC to inform us about what the future is likely to be under various scenarios, and we need stories to make those futures vividly imaginable and emotionally charged. Only then can risk move from an abstract concept to a motivator for action anchored in our values and realities.

4. CONCLUSION

Climate change confronts humanity with unprecedented risks, and understanding those risks requires both intellectual and imaginative effort. This article has explored how a work of fiction, Elif Shafak's climate change story *He Are the People* and scientific reports by the IPCC each contribute to our comprehension of climate risks in complementary ways. The comparison revealed that Shafak's dystopian story, though invented, is tightly interwoven with factual patterns identified by science: severe drought, forced migration, social collapse, and unequal adaptation. In many respects, the story can be seen as a narrative dramatization of an IPCC worst-case scenario. Yet, the analysis also showed that the story ventures into territories that scientific discourse finds hard to reach—illuminating the moral quandaries, emotional struggles, and cultural upheavals that come with life in a risk-laden world. *He Are the People* thereby demonstrates a higher effectiveness as a risk narrative: it not only warns of what might happen if climate change continues unchecked, but it also makes the warning personal and ethical.

By immersing readers in the daily lives of characters facing water rationing, refugee crises, and authoritarian decrees, the story transforms statistical forecasts into a human experience. This transformation is critical. As Ulrich Beck theorized, modern society is living in anticipation of catastrophe; Shafak's story takes that abstract anticipation and shows what it feels like when the anticipated catastrophe becomes the fabric of everyday existence. In doing so, it bridges a crucial gap between knowledge of risk and understanding of risk. Knowledge can be delivered in a report, but understanding often arises from empathy and narrative context, which are precisely what fiction provides.

For scholarship and policy-making alike, the implications of this study are clear. We should recognize and harness the power of narratives in the climate change arena. Just as importantly, we must ensure our scientific

communications are informed by an appreciation of human psychology and culture. A climate risk narrative like *He Are the People* is effective not because it bypasses facts, but because it embeds them in life. It respects science and then extends it into the realm of meaning and value. Future climate communications might take a cue from this, finding ways to incorporate storytelling elements without sacrificing accuracy.

In practical terms, interdisciplinary collaborations—between climate scientists, social scientists, writers, and artists—could enrich both the dissemination of climate knowledge and the creation of compelling narratives. The goal would be a more engaged public that understands the data and feels the urgency. In an age when we must make collective decisions to avoid truly catastrophic outcomes, such engagement is not a luxury; it is arguably part of resilience building. Societies that can imagine the future consequences of today's choices are more likely to take proactive measures, whereas those that cannot may stumble into the very crises they fail to envision.

He Are the People ends on a sobering yet thought-provoking note. It presents a vision of a world we dread, but in doing so, it implicitly asks us: Is this the world we want? If not, what are we willing to do about it now? The IPCC reports have already laid out the stakes with data and projections. Elif Shafak (2019) has translated those stakes into a poignant cautionary tale. Together, they send a powerful message: the time to act on climate risk is now, while the story's future remains fiction and before it has a chance to become our reality. By learning from both science and storytelling, we stand a better chance of rallying the insight, imagination, and empathy needed to navigate the risks of climate change and steer toward a more just and sustainable future.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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