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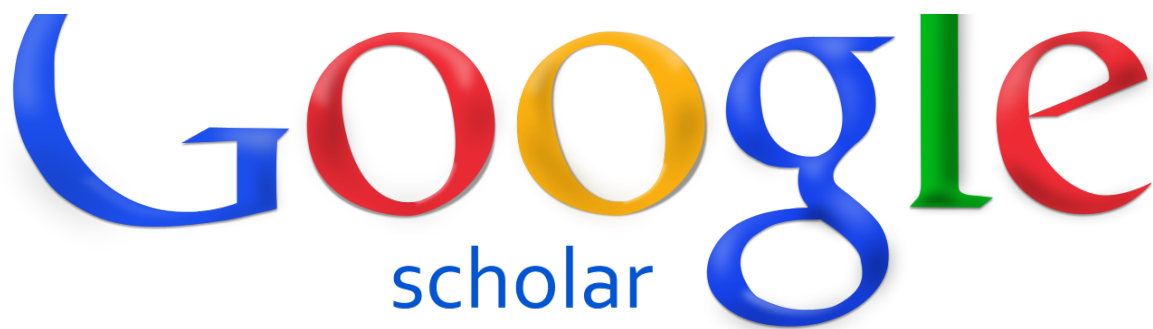
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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CREEP DEFORMATION IN FERRITIC MARTENSITIC STEEL ACROSS BM, WJ, AND HAZ REGIONS AT 570°C

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Abstract

Creep is a time-dependent deformation in which failure can occur in years. The probabilistic assessment was a typical method for predicting creep deformation. The prediction was conducted by extrapolating the short-time creep laboratory test to the long-time data. A small deviation of extrapolation data was expected. Hence, a large number of creep tests were needed, since deviations in material properties cannot be avoided, especially in welded materials. In this study, the creep strain rate of Gr-91 steel was compared among the base metal (BM), weld joint (WJ), and heat-affected zone (HAZ). Welded steel was manufactured by the tungsten inert gas welding method. The creep test was conducted for each of the BM, WJ, and HAZ specimens using a lever-arm-type creep machine, following ASTM E139. The homologous creep temperature was set at 570 °C for a series of constant load ranges from 250 to 160 MPa. The strain-time curves of BM, WJ, and HAZ were generated after the specimens were fractured. The trend line of the creep strain rate is then determined using Norton's equation. The creep mechanism of BM, WJ, and HAZ was investigated based on the creep exponent and strain hardening coefficient obtained from Norton's equation.

Keywords: Creep Deformation, Gr-91, HAZ, Norton's Equation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fossil fuels remain the primary energy source currently used in many countries. Nearly 80% of the energy produced comes from fossil fuels, such as coal and petroleum ^{[1], [2]}. The availability of fossil fuels and the environmental impacts (carbon footprints and greenhouse gas emissions) have become global issues ^[3]. New and renewable energy sources are essential as replacements for fossil-fuel-based energy. Fourth-Generation Nuclear Power Plants (NPPs) have been developed as an advanced new energy technology solution. Generation IV NPPs are capable of meeting future energy needs efficiently, safely, and in an environmentally friendly manner ^{[1], [3], [4]}. This generation offers significant advantages over previous-generation NPPs through innovative reactor designs, higher thermal efficiency, and more reliable passive safety systems. Generation IV NPPs are designed to minimize nuclear waste and support more efficient use of nuclear fuel, in line with sustainable development.

One of the main challenges in the development of Generation IV NPPs is selecting structural materials. The material must withstand operating at high temperatures and in extreme radiation environments. These materials must be resistant to long-term

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deformation (creep), corrosion, and oxidation, and must maintain microstructural stability under intensive operating conditions. Generation IV reactors were developed to extend the operational lifespan of previous-generation nuclear power plants, which was around 30 years, to as long as 70 years [5], [6]. Safety concerns have become a primary consideration, particularly following the 2011 accident at one of the reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi plant [7]. The evaluation methods used to estimate deformation rates and creep mechanisms are a key topic requiring re-examination [8]. Long-term creep deformation can cause significant microstructural changes, leading to material degradation. Accurate prediction methods are essential for assessing the extent of degradation [9]. Predicting long-term deformation mechanisms can be based on the results of short-term laboratory tests. Short-term laboratory testing is a stage used to investigate the mechanisms of creep deformation [10]. Deformation mechanisms can be linked to several creep test results, such as strain rate, fracture life, ductility, and fracture type.

Ferritic-martensitic steel is one of the leading candidates for key components in Generation IV nuclear power plants of the very high-temperature reactor (VHTR) type [11], [12]. This type of steel is used in several components of the VHTR, such as the pressure vessel and the boiler. Ferritic-martensitic steel consists of several main components, namely iron (Fe), carbon (C), chromium (Cr), and molybdenum (Mo) [11]. The chromium component in the alloy gives ferritic-martensitic steel good resistance to high-temperature environments. The pressure vessel components in the VHTR operate at temperatures up to 600 °C. The formation of ferritic-martensitic steel alloys occurs via an interstitial solid-solution mechanism with low levels of carbon and nitrogen. With the addition of these components, ferritic-martensitic steel alloys also exhibit resistance to stress-corrosion cracking (SCC). One of the ferritic-martensitic steel grades under consideration for use in VHTR components is Grade 91 (Gr-91).

In addition to selecting the appropriate material, the manufacturing process, such as joining, is another challenge that requires further investigation. Fusion welding is a viable method for ferritic-martensitic steel. However, one challenge with this welding process is the formation of non-uniform phases, particularly in the heat-affected zone (HAZ), which can degrade mechanical properties [13]. The non-uniformity of the phases formed in the HAZ can result in a higher creep deformation rate than in unwelded material. It has been reported that the phase inhomogeneity formed in the HAZ causes Type-IV cracks, as shown in Figure 1(a) [14], [15]. Meanwhile, Figure 1(b) shows Type-I cracks occurring in the base metal (BM) or weld joint (WJ). A comprehensive investigation into creep deformation in ferritic-martensitic steel, particularly in welded components for VHTRs operating at 500-600 °C, is needed. Specific testing must be performed to ensure that predictions of creep failure exhibit minimal deviation.

In this study, creep testing of Gr-91 welded ferritic-martensitic steel was investigated. The creep testing followed the ASTM E139 standard. A constant load was applied within a range of 250 to 160 MPa. During each load application, the furnace temperature was maintained at 570°C. The creep test data, in the form of stress-strain curves, were obtained after each specimen failed. Based on these curves, the creep deformation characteristics of the BM, WJ, and HAZ specimens could be determined and compared.

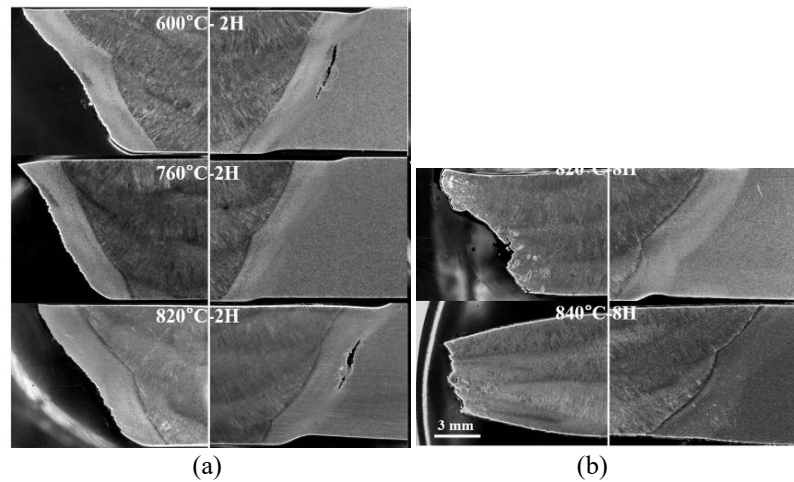


Figure 1. Fracture type of creep failure: (a) type-IV, (b) type I.

The creep deformation characteristics of each specimen were evaluated based on the creep exponent and strain hardening coefficient derived from the stress-strain curves. The Norton equation was applied to generate a trendline on the stress-strain curves.

2. METHOD

The raw material used in this study was in the form of plates obtained from a rolling process. The rolled plates had a final thickness of 30 mm. Before being processed into cylindrical specimens, the plates were normalized at 1000 °C for 45 minutes. The composition of Gr-91 refers to the composition specified in the ASME T9 standard [16]. The composition of Gr-91 is shown in Table 1. The plate was welded using the tungsten inert gas (TIG) process. Figure 2 shows a cross-section of the welded Gr-91 plate. There are three areas in the weld: BM, WJ, and HAZ. Cylindrical creep specimens were prepared based on each of these areas. Figure 3 shows the dimensions of the creep specimens used in this study.

The standard used for the creep test is ASTM E139 [17]. The cylindrical specimens used had a diameter of 6 mm and a gauge length of 30 mm. The creep test was conducted using a lever-arm machine with a load ratio of 1:20. Each specimen was placed in a heating furnace and loaded from 250 to 160 MPa at 570°C. In accordance with the creep testing standard, each specimen was subjected to an initial load (preload) of 10% of the test load for 1 hour at 570°C. The purpose of the preload is to ensure that the applied load is uniaxial along the specimen. After one hour, the 100% load can be applied. The temperature tolerance applied is ±2°C. Strain test data are measured using an LVDT (Linear Variable Differential Transformer) sensor mounted at the bottom of the machine.

Table 1. Chemical composition of Gr-91 (wt. %).

C	Mn	P	S	Si
0.30 - 0.60	≤ 0.020	≤ 0.010	0.20 - 0.50	0.20 - 0.50
Cr	Mo	V	Nb	N
8.00 - 9.50	0.85 - 1.05	0.18 - 0.25	0.06 - 0.10	0.030 - 0.070
Ni	Al	Cu	B	
≤ 0.40	≤ 0.020	≤ 0.25	≤ 0.001	



Figure 2. Welded plate of Gr-91.

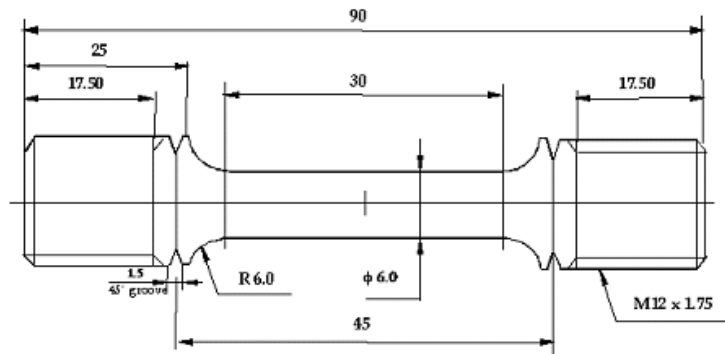


Figure 3. Dimension of creep specimen.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Figure 4 shows the creep curve characteristics for the BM, WJ, and HAZ specimens under a loading condition of 160 MPa at a temperature of 570°C. Under these conditions, all three specimen types exhibited curves with three typical creep deformation regions: primary (I), secondary (II), and tertiary (III). Typical creep deformation zones have been reported in previous studies for BM specimens [18]. For BM specimens, the total creep deformation time until fracture (primary through tertiary), t_r , is 10,885 hours, while for WJ and HAZ specimens, it is 2,293 and 1,246 hours, respectively. All three specimen types exhibit similarities in the secondary zone, characterized by a higher percentage of creep deformation time than in the primary and tertiary zones. The phenomenon occurring in the secondary zone is the equilibrium between hardening and softening processes [18]. Significant differences in fracture time were observed in the creep test results between the BM specimen and the welded zones (WJ and HAZ). Degradation in the weld zone shortens the creep deformation until it eventually fractures suddenly. To quantitatively determine the impact of welding on creep resistance, a series of loading tests at 570 °C with varying loads was conducted, and the results were compared. By applying these loading variations, the deformation rate and creep mechanism can be determined.

Figures 5(a–c) show the creep strain rate versus time curves for the BM, WJ, and HAZ specimens, respectively, under a loading condition of 160 MPa. These curves were obtained by calculating the rate of change of creep deformation with respect to time ($d\epsilon/dt$). The creep strain rate can be determined in two ways: either from the minimum value in the secondary region or from the average of the primary, secondary, and tertiary regions. Calculating the strain rate based on the average value yields a more conservative result compared to the minimum value [9]. In this study, the creep strain rate was determined as the minimum value observed in each curve in Figure 5 (a–c). The minimum creep strain rate for each specimen was determined by drawing a horizontal line based on the density of the distribution of the lowest creep strain rate values. The

minimum strain rate values for the BM, HAZ, and WJ specimens are 2.060E-7, 3.4019E-6, and 1.6323E-6 (1/h), respectively. To determine the trend of the creep strain rate under different loading conditions, the Norton equation was applied. The Norton equation is simply formulated as follows [7]:

$$\dot{\epsilon}_{ss} = A(\sigma)^n \tag{1}$$

The values of A and n are the creep constant and exponent, respectively.

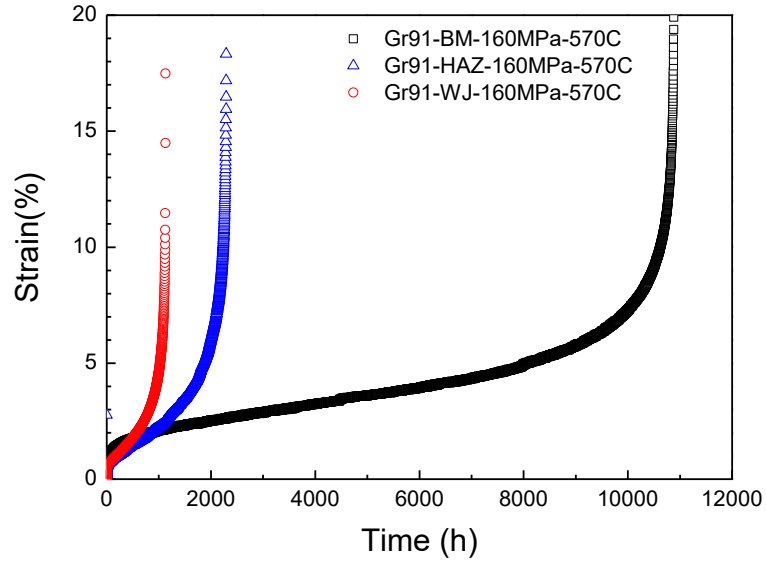
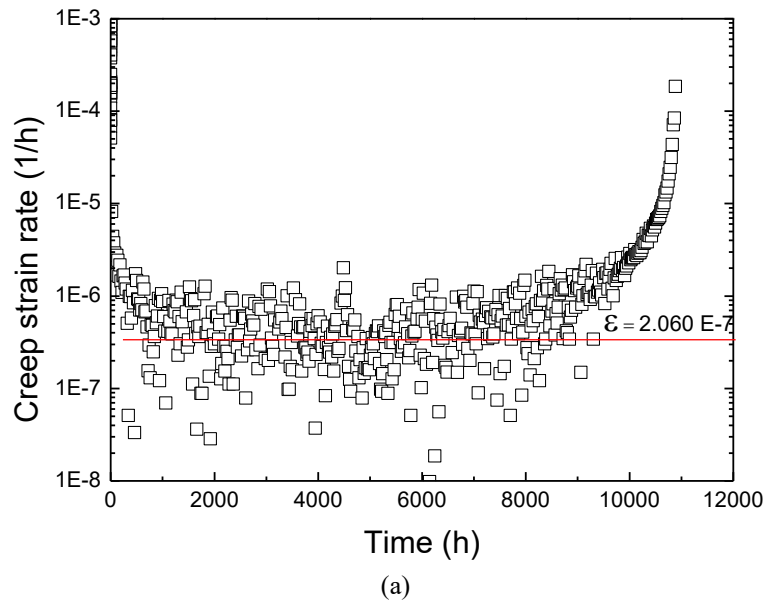
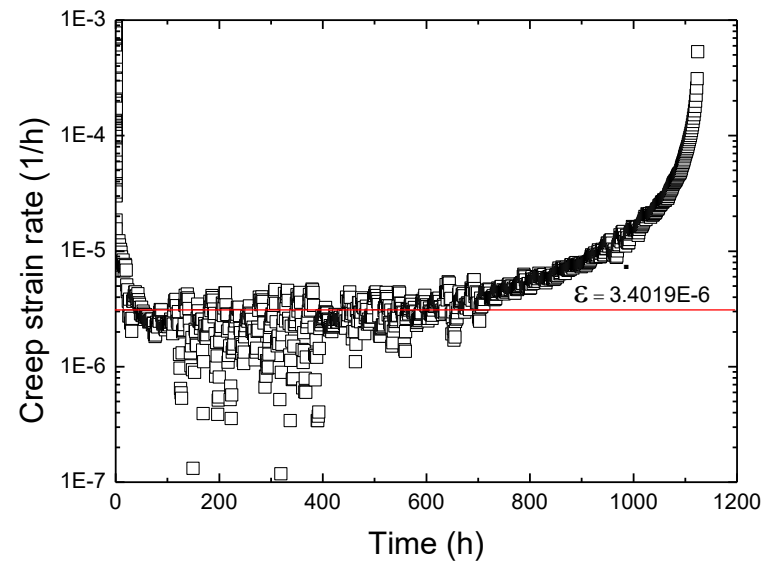
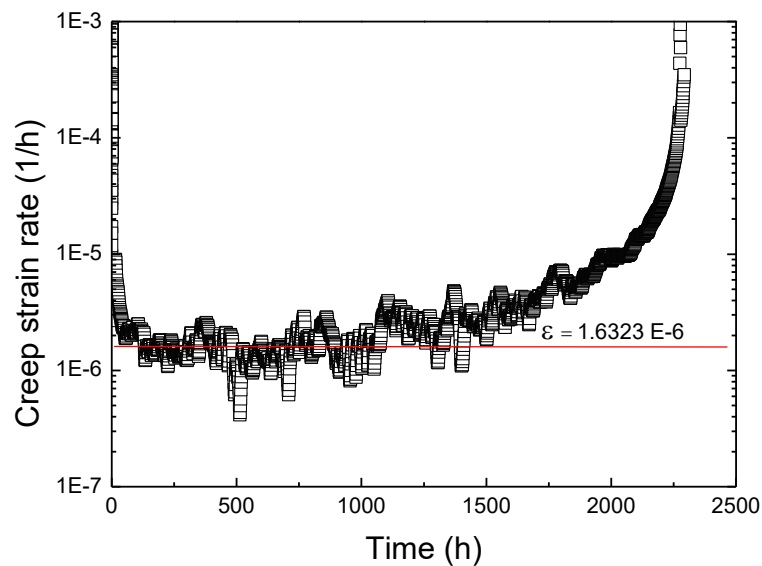


Figure 4. Typical creep curve at 160 MPa; (a) BM, (b) HAZ, (c) WJ.





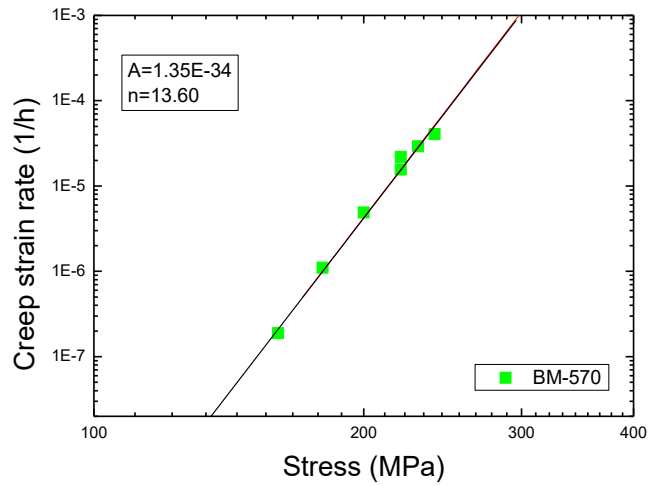
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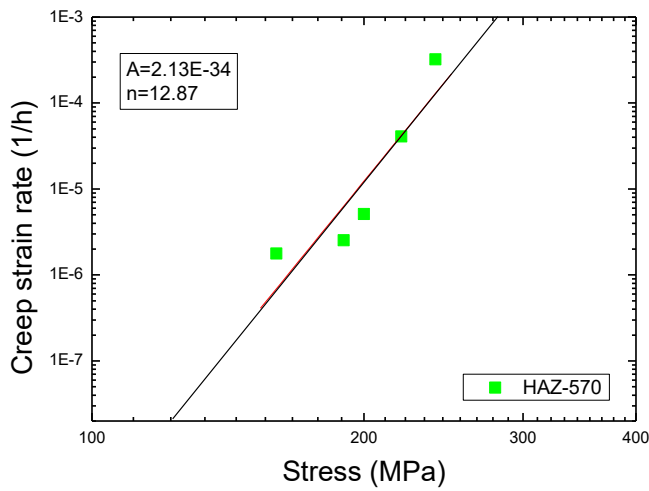
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Figure 5. Minimum creep strain rate values during secondary creep at 160 MPa; (a) BM, (b) HAZ, (c) WJ.

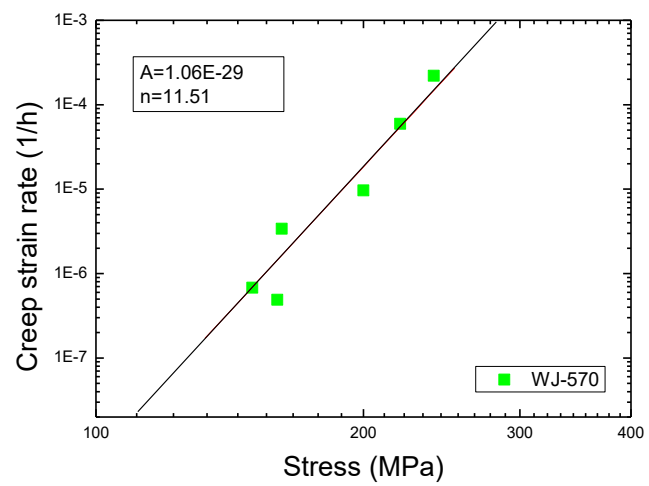
The values of A and n represent the strain hardening coefficient and the creep exponent, respectively. Applying the Norton equation to each specimen yields the trend lines shown in Figures 6(a)–(c). The values of the constants A and n for the BM, HAZ, and WJ specimens are summarized in Table 2. It has been reported that the creep exponent, n , represents the mechanism of creep deformation^{[19][20]}. In this study, the applied creep load range falls within the high-stress regime^[20]. In the high-stress regime, creep exponent values reported in previous studies are greater than 11^{[19],[20]}. Meanwhile, in the low-stress regime, reported creep exponents range from 5 to 7^[19]. In the high-stress range, the creep deformation mechanism involved is dislocation climb. Dislocation climb occurs due to the presence of obstacles, such as precipitates $M_{23}C_6$, M_2N , and MX , during creep deformation^[21].



(a)



(b)



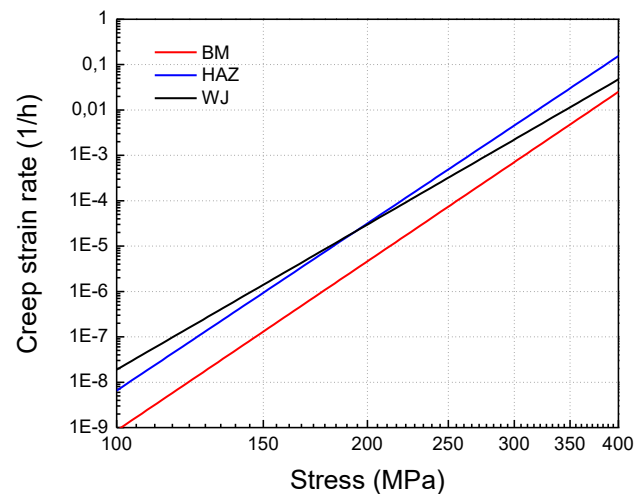
(c)

Figure 6. Creep strain rate to the applied load; (a) BM, (b) HAZ, (c) WJ.

Table 2. Strain hardening coefficient *and* creep exponent for each specimen

	A	n
BM	1.35E-34	13.60
HAZ	2.13E-33	12.87
WJ	1.06E-29	11.51

Figure 7 compares predicted creep strain rates based on trendline extensions for the BM, HAZ, and WJ specimens. High-load testing allows for the prediction of creep strain rates in the low-load range. In the BM specimen, the creep strain rate remained consistently lower than that of the HAZ and WJ specimens. An interesting finding is observed in the strain-rate trends of the HAZ and WJ. In the low-load category, the WJ strain rate showed a higher trend than that of the HAZ specimen. The HAZ strain rate intersects with WJ at approximately 180 MPa. Above a loading of 180 MPa, the HAZ strain rate showed a higher trend compared to WJ and was categorized as high loading. In the low-loading category, the creep heating duration was quite long. This extended duration caused the HAZ region to experience a strength increase due to excessive heating [14]. Conversely, the homogeneous regions, namely WJ and BM, underwent softening. This increases the potential for fracture in areas with a more homogeneous structure, namely WJ or BM. It has been reported that cracks occurring in homogeneous areas are classified as Type-I cracks [14]. Conversely, in the high-loading category, the short heating time leads to initial cracking in the HAZ. Cracks in the HAZ are classified as Type-IV cracks. The type of crack that occurs determines the strain rate in each area, as shown in Figure 7.

**Figure 7.** Comparison of creep strain rates under high and low loading conditions; (a) BM, (b) HAZ, (c) WJ.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the creep strain rate trends of Gr-91 steel in welded specimens were investigated. The creep strain rates at a temperature of 570 °C for the three welded areas, base metal (BM), heat-affected zone (HAZ), and weld joint (WJ), were obtained based on load variations under high-load conditions. Based on the strain rate values, the strain hardening coefficient and creep exponent can be determined by applying Norton's equation. The creep exponent values for all three specimen types were above 11, indicating a dislocation-climb mechanism for creep deformation. Furthermore, the highest creep strain rate was observed in the HAZ specimen under the high-load category, while under the low-load category, the highest creep strain rate was observed

in the WJ specimen. The BM specimen consistently exhibited the lowest creep strain rate compared to the HAZ and WJ specimens in both the low- and high-load categories.

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