



An Exploration of Contemporary Issues in Maggie Gee's The Ice People

Dr. Shivaji D. Sargar¹, Kriti Ameya Chavan²

¹Professor of English & Director, Centre for Distance and Online Education, University of Mumbai,
Maharashtra, India

²Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, University of Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

The world today is faced by several contemporary issues such as poverty, unemployment, political unrest, environmental crises, decline in birth rates, breaking of families, gender inequality, racism and so on. Although the list of modern problems is extremely vast, this paper primarily focusses on the three broad areas of challenges that have bridged the gap between fiction and reality. These are, the problem of climate change and its consequent outcome of climate migration and addiction to technological gadgets surfaced in Gee's *The Ice People* (1998).

The present paper provides an in-depth analysis of the novel as a comprehensive study of the modern-day challenges of both, social and ecological collapse. Since the text depicts a dystopian world refluxed in an aftermath of the calamitous consequences, the present study examines the text as an exploration of the human-centered perspective towards nature, the loss of human connection with the natural world and the flailing future of mankind due to the sharp decline in the fertility rates. The current paper examines this human-centered perspective through several lenses encompassing physiological, social, cultural and psychological dimensions highlighting its impact on the lives of the characters.

Keywords

Climate change, environmental collapse, climate migration, human-centered view, societal collapse, industrial supremacy.

About Maggie Gee

One of the most notable contemporary British women writers, Maggie Gee's works encompass a range of modern-day themes that have a universal appeal. Maggie Gee is born on 2nd November in Poole, Dorset and educated at state schools and Somerville College, Oxford. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (FRSL), Gee was awarded OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) in 2012, for services to literature. Her first published novel is *Dying, in Other Words* (1981). And since then, she has written several critically acclaimed books.

Gee's skillfulness lies in her scrupulous observation of the human condition. Her narratives are intertwined with social critique and the mundane. Her writing fuses sharp wit with irony. Her texts explore challenges of unequal distribution of wealth, climate change, infertility, gender segregation, migration, unemployment, to name a few. Gee's writing is found in conflict with the human-centered approach and is seen exploring a world of futuristic landscape of technology impacting the environment.

Gee's Literary Canon

Maggie Gee's writings span a wide range of fictional work mainly reflecting the social and environmental issues. Novels penned by Gee are *Dying, in Other Words* (1981), *The Burning Book* (1983), *Light Years* (1985), *Grace* (1989), *Where are the Snows* (1991), *Lost children* (1994), *The Ice People* (1998), *The White Family* (2002), *The Flood* (2004), *My Cleaner* (2005), *My Driver* (2009), *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (2014) and , *The Red Children* (2022). Maggie Gee has also expanded her literary reach into shorter fiction, with her collection titled *The Blue*.

Introduction

The human pursuit of relentless escalation of the economic growth has blinded the human-centric society towards the aftermath of the overuse of the resources of the natural world. Looking back, a turning point in the human history has been marked by the dawn of industrialization that brought about a revolutionary change profoundly impacting the environment, economy and the society. The domestic lives of the people in the Britain where it first happened in the mid-1700's, witnessed a rapid transition from rural agrarian life to a mechanized automated existence. Domestic craftsmanship was swiftly shifted to commodities manufactured by machines. Gradually, this advent began to spread globally impacting the environment not undermining the socio-political challenges of unemployment, exploitation and poverty. A classic work that demonstrates the societal shift to urbanization, class disparity and poor working conditions is Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1850). Thus, it can be said that the industrial revolution reshaped daily lives of the people, changed their workplace activities and transformed the way people interacted in this newly automated world. On an environmental context, this industrial transformation led to the increase of pollutants in the air due to emission of toxic gases, gradually impacting the livable surroundings. Further, the human world began to distance themselves from the natural world. In recent times, the technological intervention in human lives have worsened the situation by doing more harm than good to the existing world.

The present paper probes not only into the theme of human-centered view to life, but also the ecological collapse and the environmental migration caused due to bleak survival in extreme climatic conditions through close reading of Maggie Gee's climate-fiction, *The Ice People* (1998). Gee's narrative is an eco-apocalyptic story that is based on the aftermath of an environmentally disrupted world. The present study focusses on the social, cultural and psychological impact of the altered world on the lives of the characters in Gee's text. In doing so, this paper argues Gee's employment of sociological lens to represent a world addicted to technology that substituting the natural world with its detrimental effects on the lives of her characters.

The Contemporary Issue of Environmental Collapse

The contemporary world faces an acute reflux of irreversible ecological outcomes. It is a known fact that the advancement of the industrial revolution led to an alteration in the climate conditions globally. The release of the harmful gasses in the environment have led to the catastrophic phenomena of global warming. The human activities in the pursuit of economic expansion and urbanization have led to several environmental issues such as deforestation, rise in temperature, extinction of species, rising of sea-levels and collapsing ecosystems. The first section of this paper analyses the contemporary eco-fictional British woman writer, Maggie Gee's pivotal eco-apocalyptic and dystopic work, *The Ice People* (1998), from the perspective of an ecocritical lens.

Ecocriticism can be understood as a critical approach in literary studies that examines the interrelation between literature and the surrounding environment. Ecocriticism studies the interconnectedness of the human societies with their natural surroundings. It analyses the depiction of nature that foregrounds the severity of ecological/eco-apocalyptic factors in a text. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, 'Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (Barry 239).

Ecocriticism has emerged to be an interdisciplinary branch of study that analyses the eco-fiction world of literature and its interaction with environmental studies, biology, cultural studies etc. While nature writing celebrated the wonders of nature in the works of Romantic poets of the mid-nineteenth century, ecocriticism critiques the dehumanizing effects of the industrial activity on the biodiversity. One of the most renowned nature poets of the Romantic period, John Clare's famous poem, '*I love to see the summer beaming forth*' (1841) celebrates the simple joys of watching a wild flower bloom. 'I love to see the wild flowers come again' (Allen 90). However, in a human centered eco-dystopic world, Gee's narrative, *The Ice People*, is a lament to the loss of the natural world, 'that the flowers she loved had been selectively bred to make them bigger and longer lasting,' (Gee, 111). The present paper, thus, studies the portrayal of nature in a text and advocates for sustainable living by motivating the readers to take actions to reduce the human footprint on the climate.

The Modern-day Challenge of Migration

'Migration refers to movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a state.... it includes migration of refugees....' (Janos J. Bogardi, et al, 360) as stated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The current global environmental situation of the ecological collapse has led to several groups of people migrating to a different place. This displacement of people that

takes place due to extreme weather conditions in the homeland to a safer land is called as environmental migration.

The present paper studies the novel, *The Ice People*, by probing into the lives of the characters of the eco-catastrophic Europe. Gee's message in the novel is of utmost relevance in today's time where the environmental refugees have not only to lose their homeland but also face loss of identity and culture. Gee's fiction very deftly captures this situation when Saul is persuades 'Dora' his robotic companion, to let go off them since Saul and his son Luke are escaping the freezing Europe to a warmer place like Africa. 'Dora, ... We are going away. Luke and I. To Africa. You can't come with us. I'm very sorry. Ver sad that you can't come' (Gee 294). Gee has a deeper message here in Dora's response to Saul. 'I cannot forget you. You are in my memory. Everything that you say is in my memory. Also, Sarah is in my memory. And Briony. And Luke's voice, singing -' (Gee 295). This subtly reminds us the pain and struggle faced by the climate refugees for losing the land and the culture they call their own.

The Problem of Human-Centrism: Critique of Modern Industrialism

In the novel, *The Ice People*, Gee critiques the human supremacy and the technological prowess that proves to be inadequate to cope with the climatic shift that takes place in Europe. Analogous to viewing the effects of industrialism as the root cause of catastrophic environmental degradation of the planet, is the philosophical ideology of deep ecology, 'a nondualistic view of ourselves as inextricably connected to, rather than separate from, the more-than-human world around us' (Diehm 3) advocated by the Norwegian thinker Arne Ness in 1972. Ness lays as one of the principles of deep ecology, agreed on by George Sessions, 'Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening' (Hiltner 50). This extreme intervention in the environment to merely fulfil the human aspirations is an anthropogenic approach towards the natural world. Gee points out the adverse effects of such an intrusion by setting her fictional work in the middle of the 21st century or beyond 2050 near-future Britain.

When the human centred world with all its powers and dominance over the natural world, witnesses the onset of the ice age, 'we needed somebody to save us from the ice' (Gee 150), the technological innovations failed to alleviate the climatic condition. 'Settlements began to be abandoned...A team of scientists taking measurements in the Arctic lost radio contact and disappeared' (Gee 151).

This draws our attention towards the interrelationship that is shared among the creatures of the planet. Nevertheless, emphasis should be given to the fact that being an integral part of the ecosystem, it does not imply that human beings are superior to other living and nonliving components depending on the utility that is provided to humans. For the optimum orderliness of the ecosystem, it is important to protect the planet along with its biotic and abiotic elements that are significantly contributing to the ecosystem.

Conclusion

Among the planets that are a part of the solar system, Earth is one planet that is home to infinite forms of living creatures and several species. The emergence of life on earth however did not happen instantly. Multiple theories regarding the origin of life support and help trace and understand the gradual evolution of life that was in the making billions of years ago. The theories propounded by scientists spanning generations of research work in the area of the emergence of life and the formation of the entire ecosystem functioning today should at least ethically codify the value of life on earth in order to preserve it for the future times.

With the advent of movements like industrialization, urbanization, materialism and consumerism, came also into existence the challenges of deforestation, environmental degradation, plastic pollution, and exploitation of natural resources. While humans recurrently failed to prioritize and protect Nature, our Provider, the society at large is facing the repercussions of the global issues of climate catastrophe, climate migration and human-nature disconnection.

There have been insidious effects on the ecosystem that has been a consequence of the human world overpowering the non-human world. This degrading situation has been vividly captured in the texts of the contemporary authors. The authors have found a room to explore the social and environmental issues that have been reflected in the fictional world of their respective works. Maggie Gee's work in consideration, *The Ice People*, questions human supremacy and critiques anthropocentric views that disconnect the human world with the natural world. Gee's work serves as a critique to the most challenging issues of the 21st century. The industrial supremacy has taken over our connection with the natural world. And has proved to be incompetent to save the world from the ice the characters in the novel as surrendered to. This paper thus explores Gee's themes of social and environmental problems relevant in today's times.

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