

Maggie Gee's *The Red Children*: An Ecocritical Reading

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 faces environmental issues that are apparently irreversible. Although fresh environmental statistics and data highlight newspapers and news channels at the break of each new day, there are little mitigation measures brought into practice to alleviate the detrimental factors leading to environment degradation occurring globally. The eco-apocalyptic state of the world catalyzes for a new understanding to be achieved from the human world towards the non-human world. It is observed that literature of all times has reflected the issues related to society. Writers from the past have been writing on issues related to the environment since a very lengthy span of time. Unarguably, Rachel Carson's notable work *Silent Spring* (1962) revolutionized the contemporary thought drawing attention into the environmental damage caused by use of harmful pesticides. In the present day, literary voices globally are making pivotal contributions to mobilize people, institutes and organizations worldwide to spread awareness about the acute ecological challenge. In this context, the present paper delves into an eco-fictional work of Maggie Gee. Gee is a well-known contemporary British novelist whose work has been shortlisted for the Orange Prize and the International Impac Award. Many of Gee's characters are found in constant conflict with the environmental forces. The present paper examines Gee's recent novel, *The Red Children* (2022) through an ecocritical lens. This research paper uncovers the ecocritical elements in Gee's fiction representing her as an ecocritical writer.

Keywords: Climate change, environmental degradation, ecocriticism, migration, environmental justice, anthropocene.

Introduction

Maggie Gee, one of the most notable contemporary British women writers, is distinguished by a distinctive and experimental style of writing. Her writing is a unique blend of keen intellect and a profound feeling, deftly weaving the socio-political dynamics with the characters' inner landscapes of longings, triumphs and hopes.

Gee's works encompass a range of modern-day themes that have global relevance. Her craftsmanship lies in her diligent exploration of the societal issues concerning the social problems of climate change, poverty, migration, gender discrimination, human relationships, xenophobia, unemployment and infertility to name a few. However, much of her work can be studied from the perspective of the interconnectedness shared between human beings and the environment. Some of the themes that can be listed from the works written

by Maggie Gee are the orderliness of the ecological decor, balancing the needs of technology vs natural means to live and sustaining the natural resources.

Among her notable works, Gee's most recent novel, *The Red Children* (2022) essentially deals with environmental issues. In an age threatened by environmental degradation, Gee's work resonates with global pertinence. The present paper examines Gee's work through an ecocritical lens.

Ecocriticism: Definition and Scope

William Rueckert in his 1978 essay, '*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*' coined the term 'ecocriticism'. Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (Barry 239). Ecocriticism has emerged as one of the most relevant contemporary theoretical frameworks in literary studies. At its core, ecocriticism rejects the notions of human supremacy over the non-human entities that constitute the ecosystem. At the same time, it examines how nature is represented in a text analyzing the ecological concerns expressed by the author.

With the advent of the twentieth century, the perspective towards nature writing changed significantly. The perception of nature changed to a sense of concern for the depleting biodiversity caused due to the industrialization, growth in population, pollution, extinction of species and other such deterrents that brought about deterioration of the environment. In this context, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is one significant example.

In its present day, ecocriticism has acquired an interdisciplinary approach that examines literature and the environment advocating the immediacy of shifting to an eco-centric approach from an anthropocentric view towards nature. There is a transition from the literature of the wilderness and the pastoral to eco-apocalyptic dystopic world. Canadian author Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) which extrapolates the unchecked effects of genetic engineering in altering the ecosystem is a quintessential example. Similarly, Gee's *The Ice People* (1998), an eco-apocalyptic work of fiction subjugated by an impending ice age is a cautionary fable against the environmentally collapsed world. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* examines the impact of industrialization and urbanization on the fragile ecosystem and marginalized people.

Correspondingly, Gee's latest work *The Red Children* published in 2022, can be examined through an ecocritical lens. This paper investigates into the environmental concerns that are illustrated in the novel thereupon studying the text as an eco-fiction.

About Maggie Gee

Maggie Gee is a contemporary British women writer, born on 2nd November in Poole, Dorset and educated at state schools and Somerville College, Oxford. Her first published novel is *Dying, in Other Words* (1981). And since then, she has written several critically acclaimed books. Her novels, translated into 14 languages, exhibit modernist approach towards writing.

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 work 'The White Family' (2002) has been shortlisted for the Orange Prize and the International Impac Award.

Maggie Gee's Works:

Novels by Maggie 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 her most recent novel, *The Red Children* (2022). She has also written a collection of short stories, *The Blue*.

Maggie Gee's *The Red Children* as a Climate Fiction

The advent of movements like industrialization and urbanization brought the challenges of deforestation, environmental degradation and exploitation of natural resources. It's a known fact that humanity has recurrently failed to prioritize and protect nature leading to an alteration in the environment. This anthropogenic view has led to insidious effects on the climate. The contemporary authors have vividly captured the degrading environmental crisis in their texts. The environmental conscious authors have found a room to explore the environmental issues that have been reflected in their fictional works.

A brief survey of the literary output of Maggie Gee illustrates that she has dealt with the environmental issues in her novels, which seriously attempt to make the readers across the world aware of the impact of safeguarding the environment and the urgent need to protect nature for the welfare of the entire ecosystem. *The Red Children* exhibits the predicament of climate change. This near future fable is set in 2030's. In the novel, four people who do not look like humans arrive at the south coast resort. They appear to be larger and heavier than the locals. The novel is set in a world that is on the brink of environmental crises. This work of fiction could be categorised as a climate fiction novel examining the ecocritical themes of migration, anthropocentrism, xenophobia, posthumanism and global warming.

Migration

International Organization for Migration (IOM) states: '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). In the novel, Gee paints a canvas depicting global warming and deftly shapes the central characters as sufferers to the degrading environment. The Red people say that they have escaped their homeland due to the heat making them environmental refugees.

'The first Red people came over by sea' (Gee,15).

Although the term climate migrants can be traced back in literature found in times earlier, yet in nearly a hundred years ago renowned work, 'Grapes of Wrath' (1939), John Steinbeck, an American writer, encompasses themes related to socio-political crisis faced by the migrant agricultural workers who migrated from their homeland in search of a survival.

"Still, dust filtered in, penetrated wherever air could go. In pots and pans, in baby cribs, in food on the table, dust was everywhere- dust to eat, dust to drink, dust to breathe. Fanning dust left ripples on kitchen floors. By day's end, a scoop shovel was needed to clear a house..." (Reis, 3).

In his article, Environmental refugees: A growing phenomenon of the 21st century, Myers defines 'environmental refugees' as 'people who can no longer gain a secure livelihood in their homeland because of drought, soil erosion, desertification, and other environmental problems, together with the associated problems of population pressures and profound poverty.'

As the events unfold in the story, it is found that the environment does not merely act as a backdrop for the story but is an active force anchoring the lives of the characters of the novel. The Red children are believed to be the neanderthals who have fled their caves in Gibraltar due to excessive heat. Soon after the arrival of the new comers, the community of the people at the Ramsgate is split into two opposing segments. One faction plays host to the new arrivals despite their 'Bigger heads than usual' (Gee, 8). The

other group shouting ‘Put Britain FIRST’ seemed to think otherwise. Gee thus examines the theme of migration through the landing of the red children on the south coast.

Anthropocentrism

The steep shift towards the industrial enterprise that has grown worldwide has proven detrimental to the environment. The frenzied human activities to produce more and more commodities at the cost of overconsumption of natural resources extracted from the ecosystem has disturbed the functionality of its natural cycle. This anthropocentric behaviour has increasingly led to the environmental catastrophe.

L Goralnik and M P Nelson define anthropocentrism as, ‘Anthropocentrism literally means human-centered, but in its most relevant philosophical form it is the ethical belief that humans alone possess intrinsic value (Chadwick, 145).

Gee, implicitly advocates for the human-world to have an earth-centred view rejecting the anthropocentrism. She repudiates the human avarice of materialism and sketches the red people in a way that they are close to nature. ‘As Britain warmed up in the twenty-first century, cities were like ovens’ (Gee,5).

Ironically, though it is the human world responsible for the environmental catastrophic consequences, the climate migrants are people who ‘looked so... different. And they had no phones. How did they get by? Why weren’t they bored? It was unnatural’ (Gee, 17). Gee subtly yet conspicuously conveys the idea of opting for an earth-centered perspective for safeguarding the species irrespective of their direct purpose to human world.

Climate Change

Gee’s exploration of the climate alteration takes a different route in *The Red Children*. Unlike her eco-apocalyptic novels like *The Flood* and the *Ice People*, which as act a social critique and a satire of the political system, *The Red Children* although has episodes of festivity and frolic that partakes in reviving kindness in people, it is predominantly set in a world of environmental crisis. ‘The world was in a mess... In the Marshall Islands, a series of ‘king tides’ twenty-foot high flooded the capital, Majuro, and left salt in the drinking water. In Paris flash fires killed thousands packed in the *banlieue*; in Siberia, millions of acres of tundra blazed...’(Gee,55).

The basic premise persists to be the rising temperatures occurring on a planetary scale. ‘It was over 0.2 degrees hotter in a decade’(Gee,55). This ecological imbalance leads to a subsequent instability not only in the social lives of people directly affected by the climate but also by the people who play host to the new-settlers.

‘More city-dwellers moved down, then the waves of virus sent even more, people who could work from home and wanted to escape the hot, germy cages of London’ (Gee, 5).

Thus, climate change serves the narrative’s driving force.

Environmental Justice

Gee’s works of eco-fiction depict the contemporary society grappling with the catastrophic environmental disasters like the massive deluge in *The Flood*, the apocalyptic ice age in *The Ice People* and the incidence of rising temperatures in *The Red Children*. Ironically, the impact of these climate disasters is disproportionately felt by groups of people who are poor or powerless, marginalized and underprivileged. This disparity of ecological impact lies at the heart of the term Environmental justice.

In the novel, *The Red Children*, the newcomers who are believed to be the Neanderthals have escaped their caves in the Gibraltar due to the rising temperatures caused due to global warming. Gee examines, 'it was over 0.2 degree hotter in a decade' (Gee, 55). This migration signifies that the primitive man hasn't lived in such ecologically disrupted environment. Gee metaphorically employs the refugees from the primitive world to understand the vulnerability of the eco-displaced victims.

Human-Nature Interconnectedness

In her dystopic novel *The Flood*, Gee portrays a city sinking under the influence of a massive ceaseless deluge, very unlikely to the engine of the plot in *The Red Children*. Although Gee's theme of environment catastrophe remains consistent in her present novel her craft is limitless and experimental to analyse ways in which the human-nature nexus could be established in a text.

The climate refugees in the narrative are the historic Neanderthals species who have fled their homeland due to environmental concerns. The novel metaphorically employs theme of the interconnectedness that the human species share with the other species in the ecosystem, thus establishing the theme of human-nature intersection. 'Who were they, really? the reporter asked...Probably Neanderthals' (Gee, 270).

Further, Gee sketches a sea ceremony that represents a beautiful picture of human world showing gratitude towards the sea. Gee dives deeper into a spiritual realm. The narrative subtly reminds us of the interconnectedness the humans share with the environmental entities. Gee writes, 'March came. Ramsgate's 'Blessing the Sea' ceremony was held early...The path ahead of me was crowded with young and not-so-young women, some with their arms around each other, some with toddlers or dogs, all walking down to the sea.' (Gee, 278)

Natural resources like air, water, sunlight are the basic elements responsible for the survival of species on the planet. Nature abundantly provides them all for us. Exploitation and acquisitiveness by humankind however, may turn the resources not only finite and limited but also exhausted in a short span of time. Judicious usage of the resources is the most essential requirement today. Gee captures the pressing need to take measures to mitigate the loss of biodiversity in the lines, 'So far that morning Winston had managed to adapt two assembly plans, one on global warming and one on recycling.' (Gee, 29)

Conclusion:

Thus, Maggie Gee's *the Red Children* is an essential work of present-day environmental criticism. Gee deploys the narrative with themes pertinent to the theoretical field of ecocriticism. Through the narrative of *The Red Children* Gee examines the themes of migration, anthropocentrism, climate change, environmental justice and the human-nature intersection predominantly fabricating the story as an ecocritical work in fiction.

In this manner, Gee's fable is a critique highlighting the profound values of instilling an environmentally conscious approach. *The Red Children* is crowded with several characters from the perspective of whom the story is narrated. Yet what brings freshness to the narration is the inclusion of ravens. This not only adds to the humor but also views human activities through a non-anthropocentric lens. This inclusion of perspective from species other than the human world magnifies with the arrival of the Red people who contribute to the portrayal of the human species as part of a larger ecosystem.

Thus, Gee's work explores the nexus of societal critique and environmental consciousness, illustrating the urgent need for harmony between human world and the natural world.

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