

Submerged Futures and Moral Drift: Climate Anxiety, Social Fragmentation, and Ethical Responsibility in Maggie Gee's *The Flood*

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Abstract: Climate fiction has emerged as one of the most significant literary responses to the escalating realities of climate change, offering imaginative frameworks through which environmental collapse and its social consequences can be examined. Maggie Gee's *The Flood* presents a disturbing vision of a near-future Britain gradually overwhelmed by rising sea levels, ecological instability, and political paralysis. Rather than portraying climate catastrophe as a sudden or spectacular apocalypse, the novel emphasizes the slow and cumulative processes through which environmental degradation reshapes social structures, ethical values, and human relationships. This paper argues that *The Flood* represents climate change not only as an environmental crisis but as a profound moral and political failure rooted in denial, inequality, and institutional inaction. Through an analysis of climate anxiety, slow environmental violence, political inertia, social fragmentation, and ethical uncertainty, the study demonstrates how Gee exposes the fragile moral foundations of modern society. Ultimately, *The Flood* functions as a cautionary narrative that calls for ecological awareness, collective responsibility, and a fundamental reassessment of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Keywords: Climate Fiction, Climate Anxiety, Environmental Ethics, Social Inequality, Political Inaction, Moral Responsibility.

Introduction

The increasing frequency of floods, heatwaves, rising sea levels, and ecological displacement has transformed climate change from a distant possibility into an urgent global reality. Environmental crisis is no longer confined to scientific reports or future projections; it now shapes everyday experience, political discourse, and cultural imagination. Literature has responded to this condition through the emergence of climate fiction, or cli-fi, a genre that explores the environmental, social, political, and ethical implications of climate change within recognizable human contexts.

Unlike traditional science fiction, which often imagines technologically advanced or distant futures, climate fiction frequently situates its narratives within contemporary or near-future settings. This approach emphasizes continuity between the present and imagined futures, suggesting that environmental catastrophe is not a rupture but a consequence of existing social and political patterns. Maggie Gee's *The Flood* exemplifies this mode by depicting a Britain slowly destabilized by rising waters while remaining trapped within familiar structures of governance, inequality, and moral complacency.

Rather than presenting disaster as a dramatic event, Gee portrays environmental collapse as the outcome of prolonged neglect and collective inaction. The novel reveals how societies acknowledge environmental warnings yet repeatedly fail to respond with urgency or responsibility. This paper examines *The Flood* as a narrative that critiques not only ecological mismanagement but also the ethical failures embedded within modern social and political systems. By analysing themes of climate anxiety, political inaction, social inequality, and moral

disintegration, the study argues that Gee frames climate change as a crisis of values as much as a crisis of nature.

Methods and Methodology:

Climate Anxiety and the Experience of Slow Environmental Violence

One of the most striking aspects of *The Flood* is its portrayal of climate anxiety as a persistent psychological condition rather than a momentary response to catastrophe. Characters in the novel live with an awareness of environmental instability long before disaster fully materializes. This awareness produces unease, uncertainty, and emotional fatigue, reflecting the lived experience of societies confronted with gradual environmental deterioration.

Gee's depiction aligns with the idea of slow environmental violence, in which damage accumulates incrementally and often escapes immediate recognition. In *The Flood*, rising waters, failing infrastructure, and shrinking habitable spaces do not arrive suddenly; they unfold over time, reshaping everyday life. By emphasizing gradual collapse, the novel challenges dominant disaster narratives that frame climate change as abrupt or unavoidable, instead highlighting the long-term consequences of human negligence.

Climate anxiety in the novel extends beyond fear of physical destruction. It also reflects uncertainty about social stability, institutional reliability, and ethical order. Characters struggle to reconcile daily routines with the knowledge that their environment is increasingly fragile. This tension between awareness and inaction underscores the moral dimension of climate anxiety, revealing it as a collective condition shaped by social and political failure rather than individual weakness.

Through this portrayal, *The Flood* suggests that psychological distress is inseparable from ethical paralysis. The inability or refusal to act decisively intensifies anxiety, creating a cycle in which fear coexists with resignation. Gee thus frames climate anxiety as both a symptom and a consequence of moral drift.

Political Inaction and Institutional Failure

Political inertia occupies a central position in *The Flood*, serving as a critical lens through which environmental crisis is examined. Government authorities in the novel respond to rising waters with delayed interventions, reassurances, and symbolic gestures rather than substantive action. This reactive approach exposes the limitations of political systems structured around short-term stability rather than long-term responsibility.

Gee portrays political leadership as deeply invested in maintaining authority and public image, even as environmental conditions worsen. Environmental warnings are acknowledged but repeatedly deferred, framed as future concerns rather than immediate obligations. This refusal to confront structural causes of climate change mirrors real-world patterns of governance, where economic priorities and electoral considerations often outweigh ecological responsibility.

Institutional failure in *The Flood* further reveals the fragility of bureaucratic systems under environmental stress. Emergency responses are fragmented and ineffective, leaving citizens to navigate survival with minimal support. As state control weakens, social trust erodes, reinforcing fragmentation and ethical uncertainty.

By foregrounding political inaction, Gee emphasizes that climate catastrophe is not merely a natural disaster but a political outcome shaped by deliberate choices and systemic avoidance. The novel critiques governance models that treat environmental crisis as

manageable inconvenience rather than a fundamental challenge to existing ethical and social frameworks.

Results:**Social Inequality and Unequal Exposure to Environmental Risk**

Environmental disasters rarely affect all populations equally, and *The Flood* powerfully illustrates this imbalance. As conditions deteriorate, social inequalities become increasingly visible. Those with economic resources and social privilege are better positioned to relocate, adapt, or shield themselves from immediate danger, while marginalized communities face heightened exposure to displacement and loss.

Gee's depiction of unequal suffering underscores the ethical dimensions of climate change. Environmental collapse amplifies existing social divisions, transforming climate crisis into an issue of justice and responsibility. The novel reveals how access to safety, mobility, and resources is shaped by structural inequality, reinforcing vulnerability among those least responsible for environmental degradation.

This unequal exposure challenges narratives that frame climate change as a universal experience. *The Flood* insists on recognizing difference, accountability, and moral obligation. By exposing the uneven distribution of risk, Gee aligns environmental collapse with broader questions of social ethics and collective responsibility.

Moral Disintegration and Ethical Uncertainty

As physical structures collapse in *The Flood*, moral frameworks governing social behaviour also begin to erode. Characters are increasingly forced into situations where survival conflicts with compassion, generosity, and ethical responsibility. Fear and desperation shape decision-making, while acts of solidarity appear fragile and temporary.

Gee presents moral disintegration not as inherent human cruelty but because of prolonged crisis and institutional abandonment. When social systems fail to provide security or guidance, ethical norms lose stability. The novel suggests that morality depends on shared trust and collective responsibility; when these foundations collapse, ethical behaviour becomes difficult to sustain.

This portrayal raises unsettling questions about the moral resilience of modern society. *The Flood* challenges optimistic assumptions about human adaptability, suggesting that ethical failure emerges not from disaster itself but from sustained denial and social fragmentation.

Discussion:**Narrative Responsibility and Ethical Spectatorship**

Beyond its thematic concerns, *The Flood* assigns an ethical role to the reader. Gee positions readers as spectators who, like the characters, are aware of environmental danger yet often distanced from its immediate consequences. This narrative strategy mirrors contemporary engagement with climate change, where awareness does not always translate into responsibility or action.

The absence of heroic figures or redemptive solutions prevents narrative comfort. Instead, readers are forced to confront their own position within structures of knowledge and inaction. Reading *The Flood* thus becomes an ethical act, prompting reflection on complicity, passivity, and responsibility.

The novel's slow pacing reinforces this effect. Environmental damage accumulates gradually, demanding sustained attention rather than momentary shock. By resisting spectacle,

Gee challenges readers to engage with climate crisis as an ongoing moral condition rather than a dramatic event.

Temporal Delay and the Ethics of Postponement

Time plays a crucial role in shaping the ethical landscape of *The Flood*. Environmental risk is consistently framed as a future concern, allowing responsibility to be postponed. This temporal delay reflects a broader cultural tendency to prioritize present comfort over long-term sustainability.

Gee illustrates how moral decision-making becomes distorted when consequences are deferred. Characters acknowledge risk yet rationalize inaction through uncertainty or reliance on authority. When the flood eventually dominates the narrative, it exposes the cost of delayed responsibility.

By emphasizing moral temporality, the novel critiques societies that lack foresight and ethical imagination. Environmental collapse is shown to be not only ecological but temporal, resulting from a sustained refusal to act within available time.

Human-Nature Relationships and the Illusion of Control

The Flood also interrogates assumptions about human dominance over nature. Modern society in the novel operates under the belief that environmental forces can be controlled through technology and governance. Rising waters disrupt this illusion, revealing the limits of human authority.

Nature in the novel is not portrayed as an antagonist but as a responding force shaped by long-term exploitation. Environmental collapse reflects accumulated consequence rather than sudden revenge. These framing challenges anthropocentric narratives and emphasizes interdependence and vulnerability.

As natural and social systems fail simultaneously, the novel suggests that environmental crisis cannot be isolated from ethical and political contexts. Recovery, therefore, requires moral reassessment as much as physical rebuilding.

Conclusion

Maggie Gee's *The Flood* offers a powerful exploration of climate change as an interconnected environmental, social, and moral crisis. Through its depiction of slow ecological collapse, climate anxiety, political inertia, social inequality, and ethical disintegration, the novel exposes the fragile moral foundations of modern society. Gee challenges readers to recognize that climate catastrophe is not an external threat but the consequence of collective choices, systemic failure, and moral complacency.

By emphasizing delayed responsibility, weakened solidarity, and ethical uncertainty, *The Flood* underscores the cost of denial and inaction. The novel ultimately calls for ecological awareness, collective accountability, and ethical courage. In doing so, it affirms the role of climate fiction as a critical space for moral reflection in an era of environmental uncertainty.

References

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