

## Maggie Gee's *The Flood*: A Socio-Political Satire in the Apocalyptic Mode

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Apocalyptic end of the world appears to be haunting Maggie Gee's fiction. In her *The Burning Book* (1983), it is the nuclear catastrophe. In *The Flood*, she uses the Biblical prophecy of the flood destroying the whole world. As she herself says, 'The Flood was the first book she wrote after the September, 11 destruction of the World Trade Center in the USA. In *Independent* (2005), Palmer Judith has quoted Maggie Gee saying, 'The Flood was the first book I'd written since September 11, and there was this feeling of fragility, that London could be destroyed.' *The Flood* is apparently Gee's response to the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001.

Apocalypse in the Biblical terms is the total destruction of the world that has invited the wrath of God by its sinfulness. It is the purging of the earth, as God says in Genesis (6.17):

'And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die.'

But everything does not die. Noah and the family, along with a group of representative animals, survive the flood that submerges the whole world. Gee's apocalyptic flood appears to restrict itself to the satellite city allied to the empire of Hesperica (alluding to America). Even Gee's fear of destruction, as quoted above, is restricted to London, not the whole world. It is also, not necessarily, the wrath of God. The flood in the novel is explained in terms of the movement of galaxies. It could be the result of the asteroids and comets shooting eccentrically through the space disturbing the balance in the galactic movement. It is not, therefore, apocalypse in the biblical sense of the word. Though Gee has dealt with catastrophic end of the world in her fiction such as *The Burning Book* and *The White Family* and also in *The Flood*, it is not the end in the biblical sense of the word. All the Hespericans have landed in a beautiful garden above the flooded city. In the 'After' section of the novel, all the people, along with the dead ones years ago, are reunited peacefully and happily, in the paradise-like world above the flooded city. This paradise-like place has a name-plate, Kew Gardens, London. (Gee: 2004, p. 322). The garden is associated with life, not with death or destruction. All the assembled humanity in this garden is in a transitory state, because, the narrator says, 'And we are here. We are all still here.' This is a dream-like, an idyllic world, which the narrator often dreamed of. This theme of continuation of life is suggested in the fictional character of Herold, who has been preoccupied with writing a book for a number of years. He says:

In my book, I say that no one ever dies. Good moments, like this one go on forever. It's just that our bodies leave them behind. Our minds don't have to. We can choose to be happy. (Gee: 2004, p.141)

This sounds like the Hindu philosophy of immortality of soul. The life after the apocalypse, in the idyllic world, appears to support Harold's metaphysical point of view.

But the real point of Gee's novel is satirical presentation of the corrupt, war-mongering city state, whose high-middle-class population, is self-seeking, pleasure-loving people, engaged in its own pretentious life, unmindful of life beyond its own boundaries. The war waged by Mr. Bliss, the President, is not at its door-step. The narrator says, 'The earthly city was built for war. Armies were raised, weapons stockpiled; people could be immured and defended. When things went wrong there were massacres.' (Gee: 2004, P. 8). But this war was kept outside, the soldiers were sent against other cities. This is a veiled reference to the American politics of sending soldiers to the countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. The old people in the city are against this jingoistic politics of Mr. Bliss (the President) who, 'set hawks to reduce the pigeons.' (Gee: 2004, p. 8). The rebellious old people of the city turned up the sacks of birdseed and popcorn to woo the pigeons back. The pigeons are obviously peace-loving people, opposed to the war-mongering politics of Mr. Bliss, the President.

The novel really begins at the end, that is after the floods have destroyed the city, and all the people have landed up on the green lawns, a beautiful garden, above the flooded city. The narrator talks to us from this vantage point to tell us what happened before. This world 'Before' is really the point Gee wants to make. It is the metropolitan world with its fabulous population of politicians, business tycoons, the high-middle-class elite, journalists and publishers and technicians. The city, in fact, is divided into two parts. There is the poor north-east section of the city, where there are refugee centres and people living in the canvas tents. It is in this north-east part of the city, in the refugee centres that Father Bruno finds his followers for his One Way mission. Father Bruno preaches his followers to prepare themselves for the end of the world, telling them that the Judgment Day is coming. The posters of his One Way mission tell people, "EAT, DRINK FOR TOMORROW YOU DIE". But the rich people and the elite class of the society are unaffected by the preaching of Bruno, who believes that this city has grown sinful, and the end of the world is imminent. God would wash the earth clean. He prophesies the end of this world full of sinners such as 'painted women, weak women, adulterers, actors, celebrities .... Stockbrokers, exercise addicts, youth-perverters ...." (Gee: 2004, p.17). This is the decadent world marked for the last day. This world is, of course, the city state of Mr. Bliss. Bruno, the seer, is waiting for 'the great day of vengeance'. (Gee: 2004, p. 18). But the rich people and the elite class of the society are unaffected by Bruno's prophesies.

The city state is headed by the dictator-like Mr. Bliss, who appears to be obsessed by war. In the meeting with his ministers, Mr. Bliss tells them, 'Attack is the best form of defense'. (Gee: 2004, p.37). He warns them that they have to be prepared for germ warfare. This reminds us of how the American President once accused Iraq of piling up nuclear weapons. There is, of course, no evidence of it. On TV there is frightening news of Mr. Bliss proclaiming that they must have war, or there would not be peace. This

reminds us of Orwell's *The Brave New World*, or his *Animal Farm* in which the sheep go bleating at the behest of the pigs, 'war is peace'. The TV starts showing and there are reports about troop-movements and the liberated cities. 'Dark-eyed frightened liberated people' are being interviewed by the reporters. As already pointed out, this is satirical of the western, especially, American jingoism. Hesperica is shown to be politically and culturally a dominant force. Mr. Bliss makes stereotypical statements in his speech saying, 'History is in the making', and his assistants clap and whistle to support him. His speech is full of stock phrases that the politicians use such as 'having deep conviction', 'decisive moments', and 'necessary resolve'. He promises people that there would be 'no precipitate action' but 'we shall prevail', because 'our cause is just'. (Gee: 2004, p. 254). This is a caricature of the political leader, who is engaged in the politics of war that is really not justifiable. The question-answer session of Mr. Bliss with the journalists fails on account of a little girl, Gerda, who virtually invades his press conference, asking Mr. Bliss, 'Why have you got your clothes on?' and continues, 'My friend Ian is a famous painter. He says you're the Emperor with No Clothes'. This is a caricature of the American President's session with the journalists.

Mr. Bliss' government is celebrating twenty-fifth anniversary 'since the city's docks had been turned into a pleasure zone for international tourists ....' (Gee: 2004, p.149). This was done at the expense of dockers whose horses were destroyed, and when they rebelled, the rebellion was put down killing ten people. The government spokesman does not mention it as he announces the opening of the City Gala. This is satirical reference to the dictatorial government of Mr. Bliss. But, though the Gala celebrations were opposed by media and the intellectuals of the city, they, in their heart of heart, expected celebrations to be held. This shows hypocrisy of the middle-classes, who are driven more by pleasure principle than any public good. The floods in the city were suggested to be the sabotage by a foreign power, which was really a rumour spread by the government. This was another veiled justification for the war waged on the foreign power. The expression like 'full and constructive' discussion with the leaders of the so-called foreign power is the parody of the modern day war-mongering governments, who always try to put the blame on the foreign power, taking stance of moral rectitude on their own part.

The novel also satirizes the socio-cultural life of the city dwellers, especially the life of the intelligentsia of the city. They occupy the northern part of the city, in which there are sprawling houses, holding 'soft sleeping bodies, sparsely distributed among the big rooms, sleeping well because they have eaten well, and drunk good wine, and been lucky in life.' (Gee: 2004, p. 14) Lottie and Harold represent the most prosperous class of the society. According to Bruno, the prophet of the apocalypse, it is the decadent world of painted women, adulterers, actors, celebrities etc. For Bruno, these people who are 'falsely happy, the vilely lucky, drug-takers, stock-brokers, exercise addicts youth perverters, lazy foreigners, lying prophets ...' (Gee: 2004, p. 17) the people responsible for impeding destruction of the city.

The publishing company in the novel, titled significantly as 'Headstone' is a trenchant satire on the literary publication houses. Actually,

earlier the publishing company was under the name 'Head and Stone Limited', but it became 'Headstone' to suggest that it was the grave of literature. It really became the 'grave' of literature when the archive in the basement was flooded. Hundred and fifty years of record was, thus, really turned into the grave of literature. The publishers would not appoint an archivist. Lottie, one of the affluent ladies, was reading about the programme 'Memory of the world', which stated that, 'Except for Hesperica, which fought wars in other countries, the biggest cause of loss to libraries was armed conflict'. (Gee: 2004, p. 59). Patricia, a senior member of Headstone, brushed away the problem of preserving the record saying, 'It is just the past'. (Gee: 2004, p. 131) Headstone has the mercenary point of view. They do not care for quality. The editorial director says, 'It is a mistake to think that our job is about looking for genius', (Gee: 2004, p. 32), when they discuss the book *A Breast in Winter*. The new entrants in the editorial board, like Delorice and Mohammed, oppose the mere money-making policy of the publishing board, but their views are not accepted. The name, Headstone, satirically symbolizes the grave of literature, its demise. The editors of Headstone are not interested in the quality of literature. Brian, one of the senior members says, '... if people started asking if publishers read books, the game would be up for all of them'. (Gee: 2004, p. 33). The narrator suggests that the publication company is interested more in inundating the market with wasteful quantity of books. The narrator says, 'The city published thousands of books every year, spewing them out and then pulping them'. (Gee: 2004, p. 35)

The socio-cultural life presented by Gee is the life of the elite city-dwellers. The city, as pointed out earlier, is divided into two sections, the opulent classes and the politicians in one part and the poor, the refugees and the vagrants in the canvas tents or huts. The narrator tells us, '... (in) South and east of the city, children came home to cold houses, rattle the tin for cheap biscuits, care for other younger children, put the washing on, to please their mothers.' (Gee: 2004, p. 51 – 52). This is a contrast to the life of the rich teen-agers like Lola, Lottie's daughter, who could eat 'mountains of ice-cold cheese cake, sample the juices, the smoothies, the thickies, plunder the chocolates, catch up with their e-mails'. (Gee: 2004, p. 51). They seem to be influenced by politics of protest. Teen-age girl like Lola and Gracie hardly know anything about capitalism or communism. They would like to hit at banks or commerce or advertising, agitating against it, but hardly knowing why. They are more influenced by private grievances than any public good. In general, the protest politics in the fashionable world of the high-middle-class is shown to be rather shallow, and perfunctory. In fact, the elders in the high-middle-class families are more preoccupied with their private life, the problems with their children, the disquieting past, their hobbies and fashion-mongering etc. They do not seem to be aware of social ills or the politics of violence of Mr. Bliss. They are content to witness a play satirizing politics of Hesperica (meaning America) and comment on it. But that seems to be the end of their political awareness. This is perhaps the writer's criticism of the high-middle-classes in the democratic countries.

The poor are under the influence of the religious prophet Bruno, who preaches the end of the world. There are throngs of demonstrating poor and

the refugees from the war-torn areas. Gee's novel mostly concentrates on the city elites, the way they live, their family problems, their affairs, etc. These people are not affected by the One Way movement of Bruno and his followers, who predict the end of the world. They are self-satisfied and self-engrossed people, like Lottie and her husband, Harold, the old woman, May, and her daughter, Shirley, the son-in-law Elroy, and others.

The social set-up of this metropolitan city shows all the ills of contemporary western society. In this predominantly Christian community, there are Muslims, a few Hindus, and Negroes as well. There have been mixed marriages, as a result some children are white and some light black. Old May's grandchildren, for example, are light black. Her daughter, Shirley, is married to Elroy, who is black. Though May herself has no colour prejudice, others like her son, Dirk, have this prejudice. It was perhaps this hatred for black colour that led to the murder of Winston at the hands of Dirk, who killed Winston (the elder), was in prison, where he was admired by the white prisoners because he killed a black one. But there was colour prejudice against him also, because he looked yellow like a banana, and the prisoners ill-treated him. Lottie Seagfall-Lucas, the rich lady, is white, but her son, Davey has a lovely black girl friend, Delorice. Delorice is in the publishing company, where she and the Muslim, Mohammed, are singled out, one for the colour and the other for being a Muslim. They are also isolated on account of their sincerity and honest point of view about literary works coming to them for opinion. The social set-up in this city state appears to be the replica of that in America, where there are families with mixed marriages, and people from different regions as well as religions. The members of the affluent middle-class are almost wholly preoccupied with their personal relationships and their own past and present. The older ones of them are preoccupied with their past and the younger generation is quite oblivious to the dangerous politics of the autocratic Mr. Bliss and the impending danger of the apocalyptic floods. War-mongering Mr. Bliss perhaps wants the people to feel that all is well that is why the government is organizing Gala celebrations. Like the rich city-dwellers, the government of Mr. Bliss is also oblivious of impending danger of the floods.

The Gala Celebrations at the Tower is a massive event sponsored by the city's government. The citizens of the city are oppressed by the floods, the erratic and lawless buses, accidents and taxi drivers demanding double charges. But on the eve of the Gala celebrations, everything changes. The debris from the roads is cleared, buses start running in time, taxi-rates are controlled, special river-bases are promised. This is typical of all the government agencies everywhere. They are interested more in creating a show, impressing on people that all is well and diverting their attention from the real problems. Zoe, the teacher, represents common sentiment of the intellectuals about the politics of Mr. Bliss. She is worried about the war. She hates it because it affects her social life. When there is war, there are too many meetings, which is for her a stupid waste of time and effort, she thinks. (Gee: 2004, p.163). At the Gala Celebrations, only the cream of the city are invited, the rich, the celebrities, actors and leaders and beautiful women, ballet-dancers and sportsmen as well as TV presenters are all there. And there are journalists. The writer has drawn a satirical portrait of time-

serving journalists like Darren White, who is very critical of Mr. Bliss and has written scathing article on him in *Hesperica*. But he is talking to the press secretary of Mr. Bliss, Anwar Topping, in a very animating manner to build his bridges, if Mr. Bliss survives in politics.

There is an astronomer, Professor Sharp, who wants to warn people for the cometoid coming. But Mr. Bliss thwarts all his efforts, because he wants to claim attention of all the people only to him, and, according to him, the serious issues are 'national security, patriotic duty, protecting freedom, pre-empting the enemy'. (Gee: 2004, p. 257). He cannot afford people's attention to be diverted to any astronomical danger hovering over them. This is typical of the politicians' world over. Gee, in fact, has satirized the whole political class in this novel. She also satirizes how the popular but novice astronomer, Davey, easily supplants Professor Sharp by his showy presentation of the astronomical catastrophe.

Gee is very critical of the licentious atmosphere of the gala celebrations. 'Hundreds of faces flush with alcohol; drink tickles through into their brains, their spines, at first a stimulus, later a quietus; ..., laughs get louder, gestures wilder; on the fourth or fifth drink, speech slurs, eyes blur, ..., dozens of endangered species are eaten, flown in for the occasion from all round the world, plucked or skinned, pulped or tenderized, smoked or grilled ... their animal nature vaporized ... sexual assignations are requested, and granted'. (Gee: 2004, p. 250).

Like the ancient city of Atlanta, this city is also on the threshold of destruction. Angela Lamb's parents warn her to move upland, but Angela does not believe them. They have listened to the news and they try to warn her. However, such warning is futile, because this apocalyptic flood does not make any difference between the good and the bad.

Mr. Bliss's war-mongering has resulted into wanton killing of innocent people, among them there is Mohammed's sister Jamila. He almost turns into a terrorist to have revenge. Like Mr. Bliss' war, apocalyptic flood destroys all. The innocent people rendered homeless by Mr. Bliss' war machine also suffer a kind of apocalypse.

The novelist appears to have solved every social, cultural and political problem by sending the floods to this city state. The idyllic world, where all the people gather, along with the dead ones three thousand years ago, is not really the answer to the problems presented by the novelist in the *Before* section of her novel. The Biblical apocalypse is the harsh remedy of God, but here the apocalyptic end is made almost pleasurable. Here, people roam about the green lawn forgetting their earthly enmities, and meet their loved ones of the multiple generations of the past.

It is said that the apocalyptic narratives or the allegorical satiric fiction were written to escape political wrath in the dictatorial regimes. But, in this 21st century newspapers, visual media and various other publications have been very harshly critical of the western and American politics. Gee evidently did not use apocalyptic mode to 'mislead the vigilance' as Derrida would say. While watching the opera there is a scene of Captain Pinkerton talking to the American ambassador. Davy then whispers to

Delorice, 'America is really Hesperica, of course' (Gee: 2004, p. 140). Hesperica is the reality for them, while America is fictional. Harold makes the reference to America-Hesperica parallel still clearer when he says, 'the way they used the American flag – It was just like the way Mr. Bliss and Mr. Bare make use of the flag of the Hesperian empire'. (Gee: 2004, p. 141)

For the readers, it is quite clear that Hesperica is being presented allegorically as war-mongering America. And Mr. Bliss' city-state is only a satellite state of Hesperica, perhaps England. The writer is quite obvious in her projection of America as Hesperica as a domineering super power. The writer is not at all trying to hide her intentions. Apocalyptic mode is not, therefore, used here to hide the political satire. The world after the apocalypse is presented as the ideal, innocent world, where all enmities are forgotten. There is no conflict, no national, racial or socio-cultural division. There is no scope for religious fundamentalism like the One Way of Bruno.

Maggie Gee satirizes the western society for its racism, the religious fundamentalism, imperial jingoistic politics, political oppression, the divide between the rich and the poor, the fear of terrorism. She also satirizes people's wanton destruction of the environment and even publishing business. It seems that she is not ready to accept the Biblical version of the apocalypse. The cause of the flood is suggested to be the happenings in the galaxy rather than the wrath of God. It appears more like tsunami than the curse of God. It is an apocalypse with a difference because there is no judgment, or it is withheld.

The author is the God presiding over this fictional world. And she is not the Biblical God judging and meeting out punishments to the humanity. There is no wrathful vengeance for their sins. On the other hand, good ones and bad ones happily inhabit this paradise-like new world, forgetful of their past life on the earth. The flood has purged them of their sins. She is not Milton's God throwing Adam and Eve (the humanity) on the bare earth to toil and suffer. She is a kindly forgiving God offering a blissful new world to the humanity, making them forget their sins, uniting them with their loved ones. In one sense, Gee's apocalypse is more about survival than total destruction. Even in the Biblical apocalypse, there is no total annihilatism of the humanity. There is survival of the select few and a promise of continuance of the world after the purgation of the sinners. In Gee's account of the survival, however, the whole of humanity, right since the three millennia has gathered together in the post-apocalyptic paradise-like world, perhaps awaiting judgment. It is not clear whether there is going to be judgment, though the narrator says 'we are all still here'. (Gee: 2004, p.7) Gee's *The Flood*, therefore, is 'an apocalypse without an apocalypse' in the words of Derrida. The message of the novel 'living on' is explicitly stated in the novel by Harold, who says, 'In my book, I say that no one ever dies. Good moments, like this one, go on forever. It's just that our bodies leave them behind. Our minds don't have to.' (Gee: 2004, p. 149) Harold, here, is echoing the distinction of body and soul, which is one of the tenets of Hinduism. The body perishes, but the soul is indestructible. In Gee's novel the message given is optimistic for the whole human race. It is survival without any sense of punishment in the post-apocalyptic life. The human beings are purged of all their passions

and enmities. It is different from the Day of Judgment proclaimed in the Bible. It is, as Abrams says, 'the ultimate peaceable Kingdom under divine dominion ... a perfect condition of mankind on this earth which will endure forever'. (Abrams: p. 344) Gee is, thus, not in favour of vengeful, punitive final judgment by the Stern God, but a forgiving divine dispensation that purges humanity of all sins and fulfills the promise of return to paradise.

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