

The Everyday Anthropocene: Navigating Slow Violence through Domestic Resilience in Jessie Greengrass's *The High House*

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Abstract

*This study examines Jessie Greengrass's representation of environmental crisis and domestic survival in *The High House* (2021). Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence frames the novel's ecological vision, where catastrophe accumulates through delayed, uneven, and ordinary forms of harm. Set in a coastal refuge prepared by the climate activist Francesca, the narrative follows Caro, Pauly, Grandy, and Sally as they inherit both shelter and ruin. Domestic life becomes the central site through which climate breakdown is lived, managed, and understood. Their labour of storing food and medicine, maintaining the mill and water supply, preserving fruit, sharing practical knowledge, and caring for one another makes ecological crisis materially legible. The study argues that Greengrass shifts the focus of climate fiction by locating resistance within house work endurance, where care becomes an ethical practice against slow violence in the Anthropocene.*

Keywords: slow violence, domestic care, domestic labour, ecological collapse, *The High House*

Introduction

“This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.”

--T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* (99)

Eliot's lines suggest that the gravest forms of destruction are not always the most visible. For much of human history, however, violence has been understood through its immediate signs such as the wound, the ruin, the battlefield, the flood, and the sudden event. Violence has been redefined by modern theorists to mean something beyond just the actual infliction of physical harm. Walter Benjamin conceptualises it as a force responsible for establishing and maintaining law (243). Likewise, Foucault illustrates that modern violence tends to be exercised through the process of discipline (137-38). Galtung, in turn, defines violence as present when people's “actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations” (168). In 2011, Rob Nixon introduced the concept of *slow violence*, which he describes as an unseen and gradual destruction that spreads across different times and places without being recognized as violence at all (2). The concept clarifies how planetary collapse takes shape in *The High House*

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through rising water, food shortages, and the growing pressure placed on domestic survival. The novel is set in a coastal refuge as climate collapse approaches. Four individuals share the space out of necessity more than kinship. They have been able to stay alive this long due to the planning and preparation done by the climate scientist Francesca. Their days consist of storing food, making fires, planting, repairing, and sharing knowledge. This ordinary labour forms one of the novel's central concerns. The following sections examine this labour as the site where slow violence becomes legible and as the mechanism through which the household absorbs catastrophe rather than remaining a passive witness to it. Nixon develops *slow violence* to make the suffering of the poor and the distant more visible, whose harm unfolds out of sight of power (Nixon). *The High House* shifts this vantage point. Greengrass relocates attritional harm from the dispersed landscapes of Nixon's account to the domestic interior, a scale his framework leaves underexamined. This study aims to show that domestic care actively mediates the effects of slow violence. The daily labour holds catastrophe at a distance and turns it into a survivable rhythm. The same labour conceals the harm from those who perform it. For the privileged household, *slow violence* is not absent. It is deferred through care, and that deferral is what keeps it invisible until it can no longer be held back. This reading extends Nixon's theoretical approach in two directions. It initially positions the domestic space as a potential site for *slow violence*, and it then recasts care labour as the medium through which such violence is both endured and obscured.

The existing criticism on *The High House* is fairly sparse. Carlill notes that the novel uses "climate crisis as a quotidian, everyday experience that engenders ecological grief, paralysis, and political inertia" (374). With regard to the idea of "crisis ordinariness," Carlill looks at the ways in which a wealthy Western population remains paralyzed with grief and mired in political inactivity (Carlill). In turn, Bartosch and Hoydis suggest a more proactive view of the novel as a story of future-making, raising issues of intergenerational justice and serving as cultural modelling for climate futures (1, 4). Rahamath Nisha and Horizan Prasanna Kumar explore links between trauma theory and the characters' experiences, finding Sally's retreat from reality to be a manifestation of her freeze response while pointing to Caro's denial (3035–37). These articles confirm the place of *The High House* in contemporary literature and its relevance to studies of climate fiction, though leaving the issue of domestic resilience and *slow violence* under-researched. The every-day language of the novel is part of a larger argument in climate fiction research. Stephanie LeMenager names the "everyday Anthropocene" as a cultural setting for cli-fi, one marked by "enduring crises that never quite come to a head" (224). She connects this everyday directly to *slow violence*, treating it as a space-time in which gradual harm accumulates without the "charisma of crisis" (225). Carlill applies this concept to *The High House* through ecological grief and political inertia (374). This study takes the everyday Anthropocene in a different direction. It reads domestic care and household labour as the medium through which *slow violence* becomes visible.

Care is itself a recognised theme in this field. Adeline Johns-Putra, for instance, reads the climate change novel through an ethics of 'posterity-as-parenthood,' the obligation owed to future generations (7). Johns-Putra notes that the care ethic in such fiction imagines a secure "domestic interior" resting on "material comfort, and class privilege" (22). *The High House* depicts exactly this privileged interior. This study turns Johns-Putra's concern into a different direction. Instead of the parent and the future, it analyses the house through the daily labour that supports the present and views that labour as a space where *slow violence* occurs. This study seeks to fill that gap by analysing the roles of domesticity in a non-conventional sense wherein the traces of resilience and slow violence become more visible. For this purpose, the study grounded in ecocriticism employs textual evidence where domestic routine and

ecological harm become legible at the same moment, since these are the points where the novel's treatment of *slow violence* is most concentrated. The study is primarily framed by Nixon's slow violence and Berlant's cruel optimism, with occasional reference to Butler, Friedan, Freud, and Proust to illuminate selected scenes.

Slow Violence Revisited in Domestic Space

In *The High House*, *slow violence* is first registered through domestic routine. Chores, preparation, childcare, and repair continue while the world that once gave them stability disappears. The idea of home has been deemed to be a necessity; however, the novel shows that it can no longer provide a sense of security in conventional sense. In this way, the house becomes a precarious dwelling, which relies on repeated efforts of care and maintenance to cope with ecological collapse. This duality enables Greengrass to show the domestic sphere as a space which provides both protection and burden. Life continues in the family home, yet this life is characterized by emotions linked with an impending world's end. For example, Sally rises from bed and immediately attends to the tasks of making a fire, drawing water, warming it up, and preparing mint tea; however, what she says right after reveals a bigger story:

I would have had coffee, once. I think this every morning. I think it, and then I think I can still catch the taste of it, but it's been so long that it could be the taste of anything I am remembering. Milk. Mustard. Ham. They all bring the same flood of saliva into my mouth and the same sad twist into my chest (Greengrass 1).

Sally's problem is not simply losing coffee. More disturbing than this, however, is that she can no longer trust her own sensory memory. She now questions both herself and the flavours she once knew. Taste and smell can be considered as strong carriers of memory, and Proust's madeleine is the classic example. In *Swann's Way*, the taste of a madeleine dipped in tea gradually brings back a whole lost past through involuntary memory (Proust 44-48). Sally has an experience akin to the Proustian moment but opposite in nature since her Eco trauma makes it impossible for her to distinguish between the tastes of things she used to like. The flavours begin to blend into one another. In any event, the past cannot be retrieved. Ecological destruction erodes the ordinary comforts of daily life. As it does with morning coffee, ecological devastation also removes past comfort. The passage shows that even the most ordinary act, making morning coffee, carries a hidden environmental loss. This slow disappearance of familiar things illustrates Nixon's idea of "displacement without moving," which describes how people can lose their surroundings while remaining physically in place (19). Although she has a feeling of being safe in her "high house," Sally experiences the loss of structure within her life as the normal things she has always done are now gone.

Sally, though removed from the global disasters, in this case becomes an example of this very systemic invisibility. Far from disaster zones and inside safe domestic space, ecological destruction does not appear as a danger to individuals. She realises that privileged communities observe environmental disasters with a misleading sense of security and without forming an ethical bond: "We had been watching people drown for years... their deaths, although we didn't like to say so, were not really a disaster to us, because disaster would only come when it had our own face on it" (Greengrass 149-50). This is slow violence seen from within privilege, where the invisibility Nixon associates with distance is produced instead by domestic comfort. This quote implies a shared sense of guilt and shame that Sally feels. Global tragedies occur before everyone's eyes, and being distant from them does not make these events any less real. Still, a safe space makes it easier for humans to ignore. A basic survival instinct creates indifference in individuals. For privileged subjects, global destruction remains remote until it enters their own homes.

Grandy's aging causes Sally's perception to become clearer. His aging has been going on before

Sally's eyes over the course of many years. He stopped swimming every day, he uses a cane, and he cannot even stand up in the garden anymore. However, Sally fails to notice that change until one moment when she grasps how much whiter his hair is. As she states: "After years of gradual change you look around you at the things which accommodate these changes and realize, for the first time, that they have all come about as a result of something" (Greengrass 84). Aging becomes a symbol of *slow violence* in the quoted passage. It happens gradually, therefore making it impossible to understand anything until it is too late. Sally adjusted to Grandy's state to survive, yet such adjustment results in feelings of helplessness, guilt, and nostalgia about a period gone forever. Sally comes to understand what is happening to her home and to herself through the logic of slow violence. The gradual and often imperceptible processes that sustain order in her household are also the processes through which harm accumulates in her surroundings. She adapts to the disaster until adaptation itself becomes impossible, and by then the environment can no longer be saved. This threat exemplifies the attritional violence that, as Nixon argues, develops slowly enough to delay recognition and response (3).

One summer evening in the garden, Francesca listens to Grandy's story while Sally overhears. Grandy talks about a prosperous port town from three hundred years ago, protected by a shingle spit and then submerged within an hour by one storm. Yet the real destruction came later: "After the quick end, there came the slow one... it continued to shrink, first into a small town, and then into a village, then a hamlet – until, at last, only a few houses remained" (Greengrass 102). The difference between sudden disaster and slow decay is part of Nixon's message. *Slow violence*, he explains, does not have a clear beginning point or one big moment of collapse (Nixon 2). The fictional house follows this structural and time-based progression. It does not collapse quickly; what appears stable is eroding over time.

In contrast to Grandy's memories, Pauly has no image of the world before the flood. Raised during ecological disaster, his memory of the city is reduced to birds: "From the window: pigeons, crows, starlings. In the garden: sparrows. This is all I can remember of the city. My mother I can't remember at all" (Greengrass 93). Nature becomes the last trace of a lost world, while his mother is absent from memory altogether. Pauly later explains, "I have forgotten an entire world" (Greengrass 135). His forgetting is both personal and ecological. It echoes Nixon's idea of "long dyings," since climate collapse deprives younger generations of environmental and emotional conditions, they never knew. Pauly's loss is therefore personal and planetary at once. The invisible labour of everyday routine makes slow violence legible, particularly when Sally describes the emptiness of her days:

I stopped keeping track of the days. They had been reduced to their bare structure, a constant round of cooking and eating and washing up... I seemed to be busy all the time, but could never say, quite, what it was I had done (Greengrass 128-29).

She adds: "At times I felt that I was drowning in the emptiness of it" (Greengrass 129).

Sally's inner sense of drowning becomes a psychological counterpart to the flood outside. The disaster exists on two levels at once. One level is ecological, while the other is domestic, and the domestic one develops more slowly. As she continues to cook and clean day after day, her labour produces no visible results. Each morning this cycle begins again, making all of Sally's work invisible. What appears to be safe is actually a gradual erosion of her quality of life that occurs as rapidly as the disaster outside.

After six weeks of winter rain, the characters scavenge flooded villages for clothes, tools, and fuel. While Sally mourns the loss of basic supplies such as medicine, sugar, and doctors, the narrative shifts to Caro's internal perspective. In this short chapter, Caro reveals how Sally's daily work holds together a crumbling world of people and places. She confesses:

We are not self-sufficient. There is no such thing. We rely on the stores we have left in the barn. We rely on the chickens, but the flock is shrinking. We rely on the wheat, but

one bad year and we will have none left to sow as seed... We rely on one another. I try not to be afraid but I am (Greengrass 223).

This above quotation illustrates a direct connection between consumption and environmental violence because for human survival, consumption is essential; however, sources for consumption are extremely vulnerable. Survival consumption is another form of *slow violence* that enables an individual to maintain life while, at the same time, pushing him/her towards death. The acceptance of this sort of terror by Caro shows how vulnerable those needs really are. Such a practice of vulnerability evokes what Judith Butler calls precarity, a state of “maximized precariousness that is politically induced and under conditions of exposure to violence that cannot be protected against” (26). As Caro notes, human beings do not live as self-sufficient entities, but as vulnerable bodies that need to be maintained through sustenance. At this point, the mediating influence of domestic care is likely to reach its limits. It keeps the household alive and depicts just how little protects it from collapse.

Cruel Optimism of Domestic Routines

The domestic responsibilities represented in the novel evoke Lauren Berlant’s concept of *cruel optimism*. Berlant defines *cruel optimism* as a relation in which a person stays attached to an object or way of life that obstructs the very flourishing it seems to promise (1). The attachment sustains the subject and damages her at once, and she cannot let it go. The concept becomes visible in the tension between ecological breakdown and the ordinary demand to continue domestic life. More than all others, Francesca grasps the scale of the disaster clearly. Still, she is repeatedly drawn back into the demands of care. The novel shows this in a single domestic image:

The unexalted, tedious familiarity of our daily lives would keep us safe, we thought — and even Francesca, who saw it all so clearly, even she who would not let herself be gulled by hope — stood by the open fridge at five o’clock in the afternoon and swore because there was nothing to give the baby for his tea (Greengrass 20).

The approaching flood is real, however at that time the empty fridge is more significant. The current will always be greater than the future, and routine is where she can find herself now. Likewise, for Caro; however, for her it is an intentional method to deal with a catastrophic event she has known would come. Her daily routine is filled with repetitive household chores. She picks up Pauly from nursery school and washes, irons and chops carrots every day. Amidst all this, she understands that routine has transformed the experience of time for her, such that:

I found that I had misplaced my fear. The future was only the weeks until half term, when there would be planned trips to museums, city farms, the cinema, and then back to nursery again. Things had a form and, carried along by it, the future ceased to seem important, although I knew that it would still happen to us (Greengrass 42).

This clear change in Caro’s attention indicates mental effort that *cruel optimism* creates. She does not actually get rid of her fear, instead she takes steps to separate it so she can manage her daily life as usual. This specific kind of psychological defence mechanism is in harmony with Sigmund Freud’s idea of displacement. The idea is that the mind sort of reduces the emotional intensity of a big source of anxiety, and then it transfers that extra emotional energy into smaller, more everyday events (Freud 307). Routines such as planning museum trips and doing laundry give Caro a sense of control. The control provides a buffer that holds her anxiety from emerging while she continues with her daily routines. News of distant collapse keeps Sally awake. She pictures cities without water, soldiers guarding trucks with supplies and the sea taken over by land. She sits alone in the dark on the steps pressing her fists into her eyes: In the evenings, in darkness, after the others were in bed, I sat at the bottom of the stairs, my fists balled against my eyelids, exhausted, overwrought, but too afraid to call a halt to the

day because I knew that, lying in bed, waiting for sleep, would be when the desolation came. (Greengrass 207).

To exclude the outside world, Sally spends all her days on endless, boring house work. As she scrubs the floors, she continues to think of the individuals dying from hunger, from drought, and from fires in places far away. The minute her body stops moving, her mind is immediately filled with all the thoughts she repressed all day. This domestic focus recalls mid-century feminist critiques of the home. In 1950s, even though domestic life was presented as safe and comfortable, it was often seen as a psychological trap. Through this social ideal, the true potential and identities of countless women were silently erased inside their suburban homes (Friedan 312). But, while Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* once defined domestic work as a kind of oppressive trap like a golden cage, Greengrass looks at things differently by showing being at home as a very needed psychological safe space. She puts her entire anxious energy into domestic chores to escape the world's terrifying reality. Berlant argues that daily survival forces people to maintain both a "a wandering absorptive awareness" and a "hypervigilance" (3). She makes herself physically tired on purpose to keep her mind off things.

Conclusion

This study has examined *The High House* to show how environmental disaster moves from the public scene into the everyday survival practices of domestic life. It has carried *slow violence* into the household and shown how the concept becomes visible through ordinary items, routines, and acts of care. The climate crisis appears in the novel as a silent daily process, never a sudden explosion. This process also gains a gendered dimension through Sally's use of cleaning and care as a protective psychological refuge. The main contribution of this study is to reread *The High House* through domestic care, beyond political or landscape-based narratives alone. Through the novel, Greengrass shifts the focus of climate fiction from spectacular disaster to everyday domestic responsibility. The family's final turn towards kindness cannot stop the crisis, but it shows how care helps people continue within damaged conditions.

Reading *slow violence* at the domestic scale carries implications beyond this novel. For climate-fiction studies, it suggests the genre's critical force may lie in ordinary endurance more than in spectacular catastrophe. For the environmental humanities, the household offers a site where the abstract temporality of the Anthropocene becomes embodied and measurable. This reframing also speaks to climate justice, which must account for the labour involved in maintaining daily life during ecological crisis. Future work might test whether domestic care operates similarly across other climate novels, or whether Greengrass's gendered framing is particular to her text. It might also extend the domestic reading of *slow violence* to non-Western narratives, especially from the Global South, where environmental harm is often more direct. Future directions may include feminist analysis of women's unpaid domestic labour under climate change and research on the mental health of children raised under harsh conditions of ecological crisis.

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