

Wild Utopia: Environmental Derangement and Escapism in Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness* (2020)

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Abstract

Diane Cook's debut *The New Wilderness* (2020) is commonly acclaimed as a cli-fi, an environmental novel of our times. The protagonist, Bea lives in a city which is afflicted with anthropogenic climate crisis evocative of a dystopian novel or a weird fiction. The city is claustrophobic as it is overpopulated, over polluted and full of filth and dirt air. Bea is in utter dismay and finds that her five-year daughter Agnes is wasting away slowly as her lungs are infected with the poison of smog and pollution. Her only medicine is fresh air. She realizes she is to leave the city for the wilderness state, the only alternative for survival. Hence, Bea and Agnes set their odyssey and join an organized band of eighteen other volunteers who carry out a mission of adaptation in the wilderness state for radical experiment. In their sojourn they are to learn how to live in their unpredictable and perilous wilderness. With the turn of events, all the explorers come back to the city and find the City as a new wilderness. In this context, in my paper, I want to explore whether such an alternative mode of living in the wilderness is really feasible in an uncontested crucible of eco-disaster and also to examine whether such recourse to a life of animalism and tribalism hold any good to future living and if it does, then, to what extent.

Key Words: climate crisis, survival, wilderness, animalism, new wilderness.

When in 1986, 26th April, reactor no. 4 of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin Nuclear Power Plant, globally known as Chernobyl, boomed, more than four hundred times radioactive isotopes than that fumed together in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, wafted on speedy winds across many of the countries of Europe. It caused damage havoc and people called it the deadliest environmental disaster so far in the history of mankind. David Attenborough, in the Introduction to his book, *A Life on Our Planet: My Witness Statement and a Vision for the Future* (2020), has something different to say:

Sadly this isn't true. Something else has been unfolding, everywhere, across the globe, barely noticeable from day to day for much of the last century. This too is happening as the result of bad planning and human error. Not one hapless accident, but a damaging lack of care and understanding that affects everything we do. It didn't begin with a single explosion. It started silently, before anyone realized it, as a result of causes that are multifarious, global and complex. Its fallout cannot be detected by a single instrument. It has taken hundreds of studies across the world to confirm that it is

happening. Its effects will be far more profound than the contamination of soils and waterways in a few unfortunate countries-it could ultimately lead to the destabilization and collapse of everything we rely upon. This is the true tragedy of our time: the spiraling decline of our planet's biodiversity. (6)

Decades back a great many of us did not consider so seriously the impending peril of climate crisis but today it has been an attested truth that we have wrought havoc on the sanity of our environment by our great mistakes. Not an iota of doubt, the relation between the earth and the mankind has turned toxic because of our concomitance to 'slow violence' on earth. Anthropogenic interests like unfettered explosion of mankind, urbanization, forest fires, burning of fossil fuels and stubbles, digging out minerals from the womb of earth, all contribute considerably to climate catastrophe and bio-degradation. David Attenborough has very pointedly shown how in course of time the carbon level has increased with great acceleration. The global population in 1937 was 2.3 billion; carbon in air was 280 parts per million and the wilderness was 66 %. Our blind assault on this planet has been so severe that in 2020 the world population counted 7.8 billion; carbon 415 parts per million and the wilderness 35 %. Since the 1950s, the period of Great Acceleration started changing our environment in several ways with the steep rise of the greenhouse gases like methane, carbon-di-oxide or nitrous oxide in atmosphere, acidification of aquatic world, killing of aquatic animals, and the loss of tropical forest, and the like. The inhuman orgy of mankind with explosives and nuclear powers has of late added a terrible dimension to all the existing stock of contributors. Air, earth and water, all the three worlds are threatened by the desperate intervention of mankind with their unbridled greed and violence. Our unfathomable greed for more and more prosperity, material comfort and obsession with chimerical development, have unsettled ecological balance and caused what we can say, to use Amitav Ghosh's phrase, a 'great derangement' to our environment. Amitav Ghosh has fictionalized the same derangement in allegorical terms in *The Living Mountain: A Fable of Our Times* (2022).

Literature addresses climate catastrophe in many ways. It provides a space to reflect upon the environmental anguishes and the nexus between the human and the natural world. Through story-telling, the writers can reach beyond scientific data to evoke emotional and intellectual responses, making the intricate issues of ecoprecarity more accessible and insightful. Books like Amitav Ghosh's *The Gun Island* (2019) and many others are analysed for their capacity to spark discourses and potentially mobilise readers to stir into action. Nick Admussen points to the truth that literature has its own responsibility in an "Age of Climate Change" and "can no longer hang outside the world." Very pertinently he argues:

Writing fiction must become more than an exercise in personal fulfillment, ambition, or hunger for fame. If there is no *Silent Spring* without *The Jungle*, if there is no American socialism without *Star Trek*, then artists have a calling and a responsibility that is much deeper, and more crucial, than the academy might have us believe. (Admussen 5)

An American Journalist, David Wells-Wallace in his non-fiction *The Uninhabited Earth: Life After Warming* (2019) brings out the consequences of global warming and suggests some possible measures to environmental challenges. He recommends exaction of carbon tax and intervention of political machinery to seriously wipe out dirty energy, novel approaches to agriculture and a change in the global diet, and mass investment in green energy and carbon control. Sam J Miller's *Blackfish City* (2024), is a sci-fi that brings out the dystopian future

after climate wars. The setting is in the artificial floating city in arctic zone where four persons are brought there by an orcamancer arriving on an ocra. The city is technically a marvel but finally shows resilience against corruption, crime and a mysterious disease called “the breaks”. *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), a fiction by Imbolo Mbue, brings to surface the threats of eco-disaster in an indigenous territory in Africa. Ambikasuthan Mangad’s *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* (2017) has strikingly shown how a toxic disaster plays an active agency and ruins the natural resources of a district in Kerala. *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), a film on ecoprecarity, sheds light on the catastrophic consequences of global warming. *Interstellar* (2014), a science fiction film alarms us of the dangers embedded in environmental degradation. The Indian films, *Kadvi Hawa* (2017), *Indra* (2017) and *Jal* (2013) also critique the same anthropocentric view of the world and eco-disaster. The web serials like *The Jengaburu Curse* (Sony Liv) and *Kala Pani* (Netflix India) also contribute considerably to the genre of eco-literature. Jhilmil Breckenridge’s apocalyptic poem entitled *Photograph* poignantly brings out the catastrophe of climate change: “Birds drop dead mid-flight/ Reuters reports 1.24 million died in 2017/That children are getting brain damaged/ Meanwhile, crops burn aloud in Delhi.”

In such a situation, against the backdrop of environmental threats, researchers, writers and environmentalists, i.e. environmental humanists, on their private and political levels, are trying many means to cope with the challenges. Alicia Cole, a contemporary poet of our times, makes a question in her poem *Corrupt the World With Drum*: “Where will we go when we don’t conceive/ ourselves properly? Where will we go / when everything is overrun with the wrong/kind of strength” (1.33-36). This “wrong kind of strength” is the worst part of Anthropocene, the archaeological era that finds human being the most dominant over nature. So the most relevant issue is to find proper means to tackle the challenges and one such way of escape has been fictionalized by Diane Cook in *The New Wilderness* (2020). Published by Harper, it is Diane Cook’s debut and acclaimed as “The environmental novel of our times”, a cli-fi, a genre of speculative fiction that imagines worlds shaped by climate change, often incorporating science fiction and dystopian themes. The time and space captured in the fiction is set in time ahead of us. The assault of human beings on the world has mounted to its tipping point and sustainability and the equilibrium of Earth being lost. The city in its rush towards the growth of GDP and its associated paraphernalia has been the vilest place for living. It is essentially the nightmarish part of Anthropocene. “Our Great Mistakes” (Attenborough) have been the resultant threats to life upon Earth. One such frightful imaginary dystopia in Anthropocene has been painstakingly portrayed in the fictional oeuvre of Diane Cook’s *The New Wilderness* (2020). Cooke’s protagonist is Bea, a city dweller and interior decorator designer, now afflicted with a common crisis. The city is overpopulated, polluted, and full of filth and dirt air. Agnes is her daughter by her first husband. And Glen is her second husband. Agnes’ health dwindled very badly as things turned adverse in the city, many children had the same fate, and Glen was the person who proposed help to the researchers for three spots- for him, Bea and Agnes. Glen knew about the research- “putting people in the Wilderness State” (Cook 18), to “place humans into what was essentially a refuge for wildlife” (Cook 18). Bea is in utter dismay and finds that her five-year daughter Agnes is wasting away slowly as her lungs are infected with the poison of smog and pollution. She realizes she is to leave the city for the wilderness state, the only alternative for survival. Hence, Bea, Glen and Agnes set their odyssey and join an organized band of

eighteen other volunteers for a mission of adaptation in the wilderness state for radical experiment. In their bid they are to learn how to live in their unpredictable and perilous wilderness. With the turn of events after years of living in the wilderness, Bea comes back to the city and afterwards Agnes. They come back with experiences and find the City as a new wilderness. Then what does the experiment ultimately conclude? What is the inference? Does the European romanticized view of living in the fold of nature or wilderness prove to be salubrious and anticipatory? Can we live in wilderness to get rid of the climate crisis? As part of my research in this paper I want to explore-i) whether such an alternative mode of living, an escape in the wilderness in an uncontested crucible of eco-disaster is really feasible and ii) whether such recourse to a life of animalism and tribalism provides a better living and if it does, then, to what extent in an era of anthropocentrism.

The experiment needed as many as twenty volunteers who would have sound expertise on biology, flora and fauna, and meteorology too. It would have been nice if there were a doctor or a nurse and a chef but eventually they had to send the people who were simply interested. People thought it to be very risky, a journey to uncertainty and the unknown. It seemed to be an extreme idea and even something more than that. "More extreme than suicide... It had been a hard sell. Meanwhile, Agnes got sicker" (Cook 19). Bea's world of thought was only after saving the life of Agnes. "The medicines weren't strong enough anymore. Each cough was pink with blood" (Cook 19). "What this child needs", the doctor has said ruefully, "is different air" (Cook 19). As there was no other air, she had to rely on the palliative care, and Bea found herself reliant on Glen and "his stupid idea". When Glen spoke of the experiment, not married yet to Bea, she said his plan to be "crazy". It might be crazy to Bea, he said, "But if we stay, she'll die" (Cook72). Bea felt that they have no other choice as the doctors have failed miserably.

Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness* (2020) is divided into seven parts with an Epilogue. The real beginning of the experiment figures in Part II that concerns the preparation for their journey to the wilderness. Part I begins with the experiment in the wilderness almost running. It begins with an agonizing and excruciating experience when Bea, the protagonist, gives birth to a dead baby. The evocation of the macabre incident is pitifully shocking. At the very outset, in Part I, called 'The Ballad of Beatrice', the omniscient narrator reports:

The Baby Emerged from Bea the color of a bruise. Bea burned the cord somewhere between them and uncoiled it from the girl's slight neck and, though she knew it was useless, swept her daughter up into her hands, tapped on her soft chest, and blew a few shallow breaths into her slimy mouth. (Cook 1)

Here the attempt of a helpless mother to bring to life the neo-natal is very poignant. "The baby was a misshapen mound of plant green, rust-red blood, a dull violet map of veins under wet tissue skin" (Cook 1). The baby was buried into the shallow hole made out of scooping hard earth and yet the belly jutted out of the mound. No sooner does she bury the baby girl than she perceives the presence of the carnivorous hungry buzzards, wild dogs or coyotes lying in wait to fuel their stomach with the baby wafting away the stench of human flesh.

However, they began a new journey in the Wilderness state. Agnes was really nonplussed about this sudden turnaround; it was hard for her to believe it to be real. When they spent the first cold night in the Wilderness, Bea tried to "protect Agnes in a new way

(Cook 19). The experiment felt almost like a game. On the very first evening the sun went down earlier, much before the explorers had a fire. Their stomachs rambled from coarse food, and soon after, their camp was invaded by a hungry bear. We are reported of the loss the group of explorers has suffered: "Then the first person perished, from hypothermia. Another after misidentifying a mushroom. And another from wounds sustained from a cougar. And then a climbing accident. It felt as though they'd escaped one monster by hiding in closet, only to find another there among the hangers, claws unsheathed. They couldn't possibly stay here, could they? It felt unreal. Some kind of terrible trick" (Cooke 19-20). At this stage, Bea always imagined Glen taking her and Agnes back to civilization. But it never happened. But how could they return to city? "Agnes was like a colt, bounding, curious. And healthy for the first time in her short life. For the first time, Bea let herself believe Agnes would be long for this earth. And was surviving when others had perished, others stronger than herself. It soothed her anxiety. Stroked her ego" (Cook 20). There came upon them another gloom with the death of Caroline in the River 9 accident. Nowadays Agnes has been a skittish girl and like an imp imitating her mother's gestures and postures. She grows up strong and mature now.

The Community is guided by a Manual and accordingly, they are to keep changing places in the wilderness every seven days. The only communicators with the world outside are the forest Rangers who keep coming at intervals and leave directions for the Community. As we see Ranger Gabe, an ill-mannered, rude rogue, comes to the Community with the order of moving to the lower post while the team was just staying in the Middle Post only for one night. Staying at one place means destroying the food supply of that post and hence, in no way they are supposed to disturb the bio-diversity of the place, and its vegetation destroyed. No waste, no shit should be left anywhere and rather they should be packed in micro trash. As did the hunter gatherers in the primitive times, they are also to keep changing places. Any violation of the rules laid down in the Manual would result in an adverse report to the chain authorities and in that case the violator might be kicked out for avoiding any impact. They have already been routed out twice before, the first time due to a controlled burn, a natural fire, and for the third time it was because of the overflow in the septic tank at Upper Post. In fact, moving to Lower Post was a faraway travel and it was a punishment, an invitation to a forced march. By now they know which plant grows there and in which season. They have also known the ways of survival in this wilderness. They are alive now overcoming all their hardships in their early days. However, the fear of the unknown dangers in the Lower post crept in the psyche of Bea. Every incident was studied and put into ledger; the log sheet maintained. They have already seen a lot of death. They are now only eleven. Lost four, gained one, Pinecone. They are now hardened to such situations. Dying there was as common as living. They became worried about others, but when someone of them could not survive for any reason, they accepted it and looked forward to the road of survival. It was an unprecedented and inexorable experience in the Wilderness.

The Community made long walks before, it forced some of them to leave the group. Though the community members had walked almost every day, for months and years, yet they had never rambled into other quadrants of the map. They had only travelled three Posts, the three posts that lined the eastern border in the map. The map was given to them at the time of their first orientation. It was a strange document having little sense of scale. Nebulous

symbols scattered everywhere in such a manner that perhaps it is drawn after the dream of a child. Visit to the black circles were prohibited – “Places not to go”. They don’t have a leader and Carl was happy to identify as a leader as Ranger Corey selected him. They walked for days to the Lower Post, through the grassland. The apprehension of something unfortunate stroked their minds. Once they reached the middle of a dry plain, suddenly they were struck with hail and high wind. When the storm was over, a Ranger drone arrived there to coax the community out in their journey to lower post. It was their first long walk in the Wilderness, for almost eight weeks. The next part of the journey was more perilous. They are to cross three mountain ranges. A feeling of dread turned Bea’s fingers and toes prickly cold.

The community of explorers was neither much experienced in science, nor did they have much love for nature. They take refuge in the Wilderness because they had no other escapade as such-

They wanted to flee the City, where air was poison to children, the streets were crowded, filthy, where rows of high-rises sprawled to the horizon and beyond. And because all land that hadn’t been subsumed by the City was now being used to support the City, it seemed everyone now lived in the City. Whether they wanted to or not. So while a couple of those twenty had gone to the Wilderness for adventure, and a couple for knowledge, most fled there because they believed in some way their lives depended on it. (Cooke 51)

In the beginning the twenty were like the professional explorers. The narrator describes their disposition:

In the beginning, they had shoes, and army-issue sleeping bags, tents, lightweight titanium cookware, ergonomic backpacks, tarps, ropes, rifles, bullets, headlamps, salt, eggs, flour, and more. They walked into the Wilderness State, made camp, and on their first morning made pancakes. They sprinkled sugar on them. They flavored their early stews with bacon. None of that stuff lasted long, though. That first day felt like a vacation in a wondrous new place. (Cook 51-52)

On the very first days they were very much hale and hearty – “Their eyes were brown. Their hair was dark. They had all ten fingers and toes. Their skin was unscarred. The dangers of the City had never been from scrapes and cuts” (Cook 52). At the outset, the newspapers covered the news of the community of people who have left the city to live in the wilderness:

In the beginning they acquiesced to finger pricks, cheek swabs, urine samples, blood pressure readings, filled out questionnaires each time they went to Post, to see how they were impacting nature and how nature was impacting them. Their days were data to someone, though they never believed the data could be all that important. (Cook 52)

In the first few months the explorers were meticulous followers of the Manual. “They never camped in the same place twice. They picked up all their trash... They buried their bones. They measured out their pit toilets to the right depth, the right length from water. They restored their fire rings to look like virgin land. Where they walked, one would hardly know twenty people had passed through. They left no trace” (Cook 53).

There were visible changes afterwards. But with time the usual practices started to slacken. The punctuality not maintained; the old belongings start wrecking. The veneer of civilization warped off. Finally, when the salt exhausted and save it they tasted food, they realized “real food tastes like dirt, water, and exertion” (Cook 53). With the passage of time, the explorers became sunburnt, dark, hair bronzed, “though their eyes were still brown, but they were dry, crusty, and sunburnt too” (Cook 53). They also learned wild living- how to hide by listening to birds, to become alert by watching deer and the pack of wolf watching a healthy moose. They learned to know seasons, not any more with the help of watches or calendars, but with their instincts: “They learned to tell age not by size, but by the color and sheen of an animal’s coat. They learned to head for the foothills when they heard the elk’s mating bugle” (Cook 53). They also came to know the edible ones in the wilderness by watching what the animals consume. Gradually they came to recognize the subtle workings of nature upon the wild and how an invisible bond acts between the world of the living and the world of nature.

However, their cultivated practice for the experiment became irregular and rambling, warping out at degrees. Very frequently they started missing their seasonal visits to different Posts. The questionnaires were not updated. The scientists were not reachable. It seemed the scientists had called off the study and forgotten to tell anyone. Would they have to leave for the City? But always at the climax of anxiety, everything would return to normal and the system continued to flow as it was possible to continue. However, they started with twenty and now the number has dwindled to eleven only. The wild animals survive the hardships, forest fires, floods and rock slides and even the diseases and they have their pleasures. As for the Community, it was not very much different. “They were living the same wild life. Of course, they could always outwit the animals. Well, almost always. The drive for survival is strong” (Cook 56-57).

However, when the fiction comes to a close, we find that there is an anomaly among the members in the community. The wilderness is no longer a habitat of a single group of men, it is also a place of living, a rendezvous for the miscreants and other dwellers forced to live there. It is no longer a secluded place. Rather, it has become a pandemonium, a dystopian setting much reminiscent of the blood-curdling atmosphere in William Golding’s *The Lord of Flies*. Carl became almost like Ralph, a despot setting upon the lives of others. The mantle of civilization and community feelings are lost, absolute anarchy is unleashed. Glen, the chief exponent of such an experiment is also dead, nothing remains intact and there comes a certain juncture when the rangers come to inform that the experiment is over and the persons living in the wilderness should go back to the city. A few of them are reluctant to go back but ultimately, they all are hunted down in the wilderness and deported. So the question that crops up- is the experiment successful? We cannot say it to be successful because what we see in the end is not a happy picture. Rather, as we find Bea very tactfully managing out things to save herself and her daughter and doing whatever she can to escape the wilderness. The city where they come back, after loss of lives and peace, has turned a new wilderness, full of the jungles of concrete and high rises. Whatever it may be, the ultimate realisation is that living in the wilderness is not after all a better alternative to the living in the city. Cook seems to subvert the binary between nature and urban, human and non-human. Initially, the City was represented as a place, bleak and dark. The wild living seemed to offer a kind of

escape from the traumatic experiences in the city. Yet in the end of the novel, there is no cut and dry distinction, no conclusive opinion that city and wilderness are separate. Bea rather observes that “living in the Wilderness wasn’t all that different than living in the City” (Cook 36) for they put us into trials of different types of survival. Both, the city and the wilderness are surveyed and regulated by human agencies, only in distinct ways. Hence, the idea of escaping civilisation into the fold of Wilderness to have freedom falls far short in reality. All the existing binaries of human and non-human, city and wilderness here seems to be destabilized. Bea’s realization is very important in this context for the outcome of the experiment:

There used to be a cultural belief, in an era before she was born, that having close ties to nature made one a better person. And when they first arrived in the Wilderness, they imagined living there might make more sympathetic, better, more attuned people. But they came to understand there’d been a great misunderstanding about what better meant. It’s possible it simply meant better at being human, and left the definition of the word *human* up for interpretation. It might have only meant better at surviving, anywhere, by any means. Bea thought living in the Wilderness wasn’t all that different than living in the City in that respect. (Cook 36)

Cook has shown how nature or wilderness is not an escape but a force that shapes us as we seem to mould it- not all the time in positive ways. In fact, nature has been deromanticised here and Cook challenges the ways humans idealise nature and fetishize the nonhuman. So escaping from the alienation of urbanized life to nature as a site of utopian escape holds no good. Cook’s wilderness is certainly no Eden, it’s a place of struggle and resilience, and rather it is a brutal Eden. “The novel begins with an effort to return to a kind of Eden, but the characters soon realize that Eden never existed and is a complete fiction” (Middleton and Shaw 6). For human habitat, civilization is important, its amenities and man-made institutions are important. If we are to abandon it, it would be a great folly and in that case, it is to acknowledge that all the episteme, all the efforts to make a human habitat hospitable for thousands of years are placed in a wrong track and gone astray. In fact, what is needed is closeness to nature and a kind of restraint among mankind- a kind of rein to his rush towards aggrandizement and distorted progressive attitude. Living is proved better among human beings not in the wilderness. So, we may say that the recourse to wilderness state is, in no way, a better option to save us from eco-disaster in a period of archaeology called the Anthropocene. Again, the experiment leaves the impression that living like the animals and tribal people are only a primitive form of living, not a better way of living in any way. What is wilderness in absence of human beings, it will turn out to be a pandemonium again in presence of human beings. In fact, in the present scenario, no real wilderness is available as such. So, where the human beings live, there is ecological disruption and the resultant anxiety. In that case, it is better not to dislocate ourselves from human habitat; rather, it is better to regulate our exploitation of nature where we live and make our settlement. So, the recourse to tribalism and wilderness state is not, on the whole, a wholesome process to protect ourselves from eco-disaster. It is only a utopia, an allurement that dazzles from a distance but appears dim when touched.

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