



Wilderness as a panacea: An Ecocritical Study of the Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness*

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Abstract

*A clean and pure ecosphere is the key to life. The environment has a significant impact on human health and the continuous nature of life on the planet, earth. The situation regarding climate and environment is getting worse with each passing day. It is getting alarming due to the changing effects of the ecosystem. Ecocriticism is all about the study and the examination of the relationship between the human beings and the natural world. Nature is badly disturbed because of human activities. The study aims at exploring the paradigm of ecocriticism, proposed by Greg Gerard, with its special emphasis on the concept of wilderness. The novel *The New Wilderness* written by Diane Cook has been chosen for research. The study will focus on the concept of wilderness along with its Panacean effects on the ecosphere. It aims at supporting the stance that wilderness is not the place to exile rather it acts as a savior to humanity. The study will focus on the concepts of nature and wilderness. The story of the novel, *The New Wilderness* revolves around a group of people who are disturbed by the polluted environment of the city and decide to flee from the city towards the wilderness in search of peace and tranquillity. They struggle for their survival. They shifted from urban to natural ecosphere for their protection and relief from the toxic livelihood of cities. The study will explore the notion that either the wilderness is harmful or productive for its inhabitants. The study is significant because it discusses the notion of protecting nature.*

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Nature, Wilderness, Panacea, *The New Wilderness*

INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is about exploring how we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production, from Wordsworth and Thoreau to Disney

and BBC nature documentaries. It is inspired by, but also critical of, modern environmental movements. Greg Garrard's accessible volume traces the development of the movement and explores the concepts that have most occupied Eco-critics, including Pollution, Wilderness, Apocalypse, Dwelling, Animals and The Earth. (Garrard,2004) The interesting point on which many Eco critics are focused is the way how wilderness is represented in literature and popular culture. This approach examines the creation, worth, and use of wildness. In both American and British cultures, representations of the wilderness can be divided into a few primary categories. First, the wildness of the Old World is shown as existing outside the bounds of civilization and is viewed as a "threat" or a place of "exile." (Garrard, 2004) This motif appears in biblical creation stories as well as early British culture. Early American literature frequently associates the Old World wilderness with demonic rituals (Garrard, 2004). In later American literature, New World wilderness is portrayed as applying the pastoral concept of the "retreat" to the wilderness itself, viewing it as a place to find solace rather than a place to be afraid of. A lot of the "American identity" has been shaped by the New World wilderness cliché, which frequently creates experiences in the wilderness that result in a more "authentic existence" (Garrard, 2004).

Ecocriticism is an approach that takes place where Nature, for its protection and dignity, speaks for itself. The silenced voice of the natural world can be recognized by eco-criticism. And for this reason, ecocritics do not consider nature as a mere landscape or secondary subject, but rather treat it as a living being that plays a vital role in human beings' lives. By spreading awareness, ecocritics want to bring about change in today's society to realize how our selfish interests can threaten the natural environment and destroy the ecosystem. It is also important to note that community and the climate play a pivotal role. Our modern way of life and Cultural and creative industries are a persistent danger to the ecosystem. Environmental habitats are increasingly being swallowed by technological developments. Ozone layer depletion, increasing climate change, and the very high speed of melting of the glacier are the testimony of our negligence.

The foundation of ecocriticism is the notion that human culture and the natural world are interconnected and influence one another. It investigates the interaction between the human and non-human characters found in literary works. Ecocritics examines the text's depictions of nature and tries to determine how they relate to the current environmental issues. The study of the

relationship between literature and the natural world is known as ecocriticism. (Glotfelty,1996). Ecocriticism examines how nature and the environment are portrayed in literature to identify potential solutions for improving the current ecological predicament. The convergence of ecocriticism and literary criticism has revitalized critical thinking overall, providing fresh perspectives on concepts such as wilderness, environment, and land. This study aims to investigate the novel *The New Wilderness*'s treatment of nature and the environment, even though it has never been studied from an eco-critical perspective. Greg Garrard's theory is meant to facilitate this kind of investigation.

Introduction to the Novel *The New Wilderness*

The New Wilderness (2020), has been shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize and is written by Diane Cook. The plot of the novel is woven around the characters who are affected by the damage that humans have done to nature. Agnes, Bea's five-year-old daughter, wastes away steadily, consumed by the smog and pollution of an overdeveloped metropolis that is now home to most of the population. If they stay in the city, Agnes will die. When she was ill, her mother rushed towards the doctor and he suggested that they move somewhere else. As Diane Cook wrote, The Medicines were not strong enough anymore. Each cough was pink with blood. "What this child needs," the doctor had said ruefully, "is different air." There is only one alternative: The Wilderness state, the last area of untouched, protected land that has long been inaccessible to humans. Up to now. In an attempt to save her child, she must migrate somewhere else.

Bea, Agnes, and eighteen other volunteers move into the Wilderness State as part of an experiment to see if humans can live in nature without harming it. Guinea pigs. As nomad hunter-gatherers, they gradually and painstakingly learn how to survive in a dangerous and unpredictable land, arguing and battling for dominance and power while they mislead and save one another. However, Bea realizes that protecting her daughter's life will mean losing her differently, even as Agnes embraces the wild liberation of this new existence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this modern era, the exploitation of nature is at its peak because of climate change. Pollution, wilderness and environmental crises are engulfing both humans and nonhumans. Sapinder Singh conducted his research on two novels by Arundhati Roy and Gita Mehta with the title of An Ecocritical Study Of Gita Mehta's A River Sutra and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, A River Sutra by Gita Mehta and The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy, concentrate on the depiction of landscape, rivers, and the nonhuman environment, among other things. The role of the physical environment in the plot construction of both novels is examined in this review. The novels are about landscapes that are beautifully depicted. A River Sutra is a book about Indian mythology and history. Similarly, The God of Small Things tackles issues like love, morality, terror, and environmental degradation. Ecocriticism aims to trace the interconnectedness of all beings, according to the report. In their books, both authors have concentrated on the effect of the biosphere on the protagonists.

According to Singh, Both the novel has the setting of the environment. The description of rivers is present in the novels. As Singh states, "The river Narmada in A River Sutra and the river Meenachal in The God of Small Things provide a link which shows the connection of the human psyche to the locality of the rivers". (Singh,2014) Rivers play an important role in both of these novels. Aside from that, both rivers assist us in comprehending various religious beliefs as well as mythological ideas. Their origin story is based on Indian mythology. The origins of both rivers can be traced back to a cultural thread. Nature and culture are inextricably linked. Roy paints a vivid picture of the importance of landscape in shaping a plot. The landscape is the only thing that inspires a person to write about what he has seen and done in his life. (Singh). Characters are living, eating, and doing their work by living in nature. Even some characters experience death by drowning in the river. Nature gives them a place in itself for eternal peace.

One of the most well-known romantic poets is John Keats. His popular poem Ode to a Nightingale is best known for its ecological theme and spirit. It denotes a break in ecological equilibrium and depicts a perfect universe that is both majestic and harmonious. His poem Ode to a Nightingale has a natural view and ecological theme. So the research has been conducted on this through the lens of ecocriticism. Fanting Kong wrote an article titled *The Ecocritical Analysis of Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats which was published in 2019.

He says that "Keats, through his description and imagination, indicates the rupture of the ecological harmony." (Kong,2019). He says that Keats's poem is filled with nature and its discription. The rupture and restoration of ecological equilibrium are discussed in his paper. It examines the nightingale's plea for beauty and peace through the lens of ecocriticism. Nature is beautiful and sacred; it can provide beautiful experiences and provide consolation to those who are grieving. The poet, speaking for nature and all those who care for it, calls for natural harmony. The poet expresses his feelings due to the stark contrast between reality and the ideal world. (kong,2019)

William Wordsworth fought for the protection of nature in the 18th century. The article which is under discussion promotes Wordsworth's role of preserving nature for long-term peace and community sustainability. The word is too much with us criticizes modern human practices because they disrupt the natural world. As the poet grows older, his passion for nature grows stronger, and his desire to protect it grows stronger. M. A Afzal Farooq and N.D.R Chandra analysed *Tintern Abbey* and *The World Is Too Much with Us* from an ecocritical perceptive in 2013 and their research was published in the Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies. They claim that there is a desperate desire to conserve the natural world for serenity and proper mental growth at each point. They state about words worth that "as a child, Wordsworth believed Nature to be a source of and scene for animal pleasure which he calls "glad animal movements"." (Farooq, Chandra,2013).

Nature is a living being, according to Wordsworth, and it is man's obligation and duty to preserve it. Since he is not living in harmony with Nature, modern man becomes "out of tune" and fails to understand the beautiful facets of nature. When Wordsworth sees man's destructive actions aimed at nature, he becomes angry. The writers claim that Words Worth tried to advocate the presence of nature by saying that "Wordsworth's concern for nature in the 18th century can be considered one of the first few attempts from littérateurs to attract the attention of mankind towards the 'endangered ecosystem'." (Farooq, Chandra)

Wilderness is something that seems to be horrible but it can be a shelter for living a peaceful life. To avoid or to get escape from the horrible environment, people are preferring to move towards

wilderness. Kaplan and Talbot (1983) in their book *Behavior and the Natural Environment* talks about the concept of wilderness and asks a question by saying "What does it mean to go out to the wilderness—to leave society behind and to live for a while on what one carries in a pack, devoting one's time to an exploration of the natural world?". They ask about wilderness and how one can define it. It is related to the land that is inhabited, where there is no human. But technology and other advancements made man move toward someplace where they can live peacefully. It is not an easy task to leave one's home for the sake of recreation. The issues of the modern world have made man to do so. Wilderness is not a place where one cannot go because of fear, rather it has become a shelter for the people who want to be peaceful in their life. They are experiencing new adventures by exploring the wilderness for their livelihood.

Wilderness can also take someone towards spirituality. when a person lives too close to nature, he becomes pure from his thoughts and actions. Paul Heintzman, (2003) says in his research that was published under the title of *The Wilderness Experience and Spirituality What Recent Research Tells Us*, that wilderness and spirituality have a connection. He explains spirituality by saying that it is a Latin word which means "breath of life". According to him, one can breathe healthily when one goes to somewhere that is meant to live for him. He further talks about a survey in which almost 62 people participated and they travelled towards the wildland for many days. when they were asked about their experience 11 percent remarked that they have spiritual feelings, they are "feeling strong spiritually". Though it has some other benefits as well. They were feeling healthy physically, mentally and spiritually. (Heintzman, 2003)

Hinds, J. (2011) has written an article with the title of *Exploring the Psychological Rewards of a Wilderness Experience*. The focus of this research is on the subjective experiences of five women on a 10-day wilderness trip in Scotland. Feelings of attachment, aliveness, contemplativeness, self-discovery, trust, and well-being characterized the group's positive experiences. Hinds explains that the participants have enjoyed the experience of being in the wilderness. Wilderness soothes them in a way that they become close to the natural environment. As he states "Although participants' positive experiences were tied to an intimacy with the natural environment, others expressed an additional social influence, derived from bonds formed within the group". (Hinds,2011). He is of the view that Nature plays the role of that entity that

brings the people close. In today's busy life and schedule, no one has time to sit and talk to anyone. So projects like this, to send people somewhere, either it is for learning or recreation, seems to be a healthy activity. It can spread positivity on both individual as well as social levels. Because when people interact in such a healthy environment then it can surely become the reason for spreading positivity in the lives of people while living in a certain community. It can positively on the psychology of people as well.

In recent times, many countries are utilizing wilderness as a therapy. It has been known by many names. In this process, a person or people in the form of group experiences to live in a place that is declared as wild. So that they can experience new things. For this purpose, many courses are being offered for the training of people, so that they can survive in all types of circumstances. What is Wilderness Therapy? is an article that is written by Russell, according to Russell, "Wilderness therapy" is referred to as "challenge courses," "adventure-based therapy," or "wilderness experience programmers," both of which are rehabilitative, outdoor-based approaches". Three market patterns are also examined, all of which reinforce the idea that wilderness therapy services are looking for state and national recognition. (Russell,2001). This therapy is used on a national level in many regions. The state is also involved in this process of observing the people by sending them to different wild places and then observing and counting the facts and figures that they have from the experience of the people. All of the above facts and figures, as well as those listed in other articles, inform us about the current horrifying climate situation that requires urgent attention and intensive care.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Ecocriticism theory of Greg Garrard with special emphasis on his concept of wilderness concerning literature would help the researcher to analyze the text and find the answer to the questions set for this study. According to Greg Garrard: Ecocriticism explores how we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production and wilderness is explained as

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mobilised to protect particular habitats and species and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city. (Gerrard, 2004.p,59)

The way wilderness is portrayed in literature and popular culture is an interesting subject for many eco-critics. This approach focuses on how nature is created, appreciated, and involved. In British and American culture, depictions of the wilderness can be divided into a few prominent tropes. First, Old World wilderness displays wilderness as a place beyond the borders of civilization, wherein wilderness is treated as a "threat," a place of "exile" (Garrard, 2004. p,62). It was understood that wilderness is something awful. The survival of humans in such places seems to be impossible. It seems to be a threat or danger to think about wilderness.

The concept of new wilderness is opposite to the old one. The idea of a new home where both humans and non-humans can live without disrupting the natural ecosystem is known as a new wilderness. It is the place that can provide relief to the people who are fed up with the metropolitan cities. New World wilderness, seen in portrayals of wilderness in later American literature, applies the pastoral trope of the "retreat" to wilderness itself, seeing wilderness not as a place to fear, but as a place to find sanctuary. The new world wilderness trope has informed much of the "American identity," and often constructs encounters with the wilderness that lead to a more "authentic existence" (Garrard, 2004. p,71). New wilderness refers to the idea of a place that can be regarded as shelter. These points or ideas can be discussed under the paradigm of Ecocriticism.

DATA ANALYSIS

The idea of a wilderness is enthralling. It's about something that isn't connected to the rest of the world. It's about the idea of a land where human life is impossible. A wilderness is an area of the planet's natural ecology that has not undergone major human interference or transformation to other non-urbanized land utilized for significant agricultural production.

The wilderness covers about a fifth of the earth's surface, but it is rapidly deteriorating due to human activities. In the ocean, even less wilderness exists, with just 13.2 per cent free of massive human activity. The term "wilderness" may also refer to a piece of land where animals live. It

has nothing to do with the inhabitant's property. It is a place where there isn't a single person. However, technological advancements and other advancements have caused mankind to migrate to a place where they can live in peace. Leaving one's home for the sake of leisure is Gerrard (2004) explains wilderness by saying that it is something that is without the contamination of civilization. It is free from the elements that cause degradation to nature. It is the place where other species live. It is the home of birds, animals, and other creatures. He is of the view that "the idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization, is the most potent construction of nature available in a new world environment" (p.59).

Gerrard further adds that wilderness is a place that gives peace to those who are affected by the environment of the city. It is a shelter for the affected one. It gives support to those who are fed up with the horrific life of the city. Urbanization is leading humanity towards its decline. Humans have lost moral values and after losing these values they are struggling to regain those laws.

It is not a simple activity. Man has been compelled to do so by the problems of the modern world. A desert is no longer a place where people are afraid to go; rather, it has become a haven for those seeking peace in their lives. They are having new experiences as a result of exploring the wilderness for a living.

Wilderness is about something that isn't connected to the rest of the world. It's about the idea of a land where human life is impossible. It is the land where humans do not want to live. Wilderness is a natural habitat on Earth that has not been considerably impacted by human activity or any other non-urbanized territory that is not used for heavy cultivation. In the novel *The New Wilderness* Bea is the major character who takes the initiative of moving towards wilderness for the survival of her daughter who is deeply affected by the horrific effects of pollution.

The plot of the novel is woven around the characters who are influenced by the harm that people have done to nature. Agnes, Bea's five-year-old little girl, dies consistently, devoured by the brown haze and contamination of an overdeveloped city that is presently home to the greater part of the populace. On the off chance that they stay around there, Agnes will kick the bucket. When she was sick and his mother hurried towards specialists and he recommended them to move

elsewhere. As Diane Cook composed, The Medicines were not sufficient any longer. Each hack was pink with blood. "What this kid needs," the specialist had said remorsefully, "is distinctive air." There is just a single other option: The Wilderness Express, the last space of immaculate, secured land that has for some time been blocked off by people. Up to now. In endeavor to save her youngster, she should relocate elsewhere.

In an investigation to see whether people can get by in nature without harming it, Bea, Agnes, and eighteen others volunteer to live in the Wilderness State. Guinea pigs. Living as migrant tracker finders, they figure out how to live in an unusual, hazardous land gradually and horrendously, squabbling and battling for force and authority as they delude and save one another. In any case, as Agnes acknowledges this new presence's wild liberation, Bea realizes that saving the existence of her little girl implies alternately losing her. The farther they get from humankind, the seriously stunning and horrendous ways their relationship is checked. A consuming mourning of our contempt for nature without a moment's delay and a significantly human portrayal of parenthood and being human.

The New Wilderness is an uncommon novel from an artistic force that is remarkable in its tendency. Gerrard (2004) explains wilderness by saying that it is something that is without the contamination of civilization. It is free from the elements that cause degradation to nature. It is the place where other species live. It is the home of birds, animals and other creatures. He is of the view that "the idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization, is the most potent construction of nature available in a new world environment." (p.59) Gerrard further adds that wilderness is a place that gives peace to those who are affected by the environment of the city. It is a shelter for the affected one. It gives support to those who are fed up with the horrific life of the city. Urbanization is leading humanity towards its decline. Humans have lost moral values and after losing these values they are struggling to regain those laws.

Gerrard explains Wilderness that " it is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution". (p.59). Moral pollution refers to things that make humans feel less. They forget to think about the others. They just think and do things for themselves. On the

other hand, material pollution is something that is caused by urbanization and its factories. When people do not prefer to dispose the waste and trash then they want to leave that place after polluting it. They desire and decide to move into the wilderness.

Bea and the other nineteen members are from the new civilization. They are facing the issues that they, themselves have produced. Bea is the mother of a daughter and the daughter is ill because of the environment. Doctors refused to see her because her condition was getting worse with each passing day. Her mother decided to take her to a place where she could breathe normally. They want to live a new life by joining the company of natural objects in the wilderness. As they all are inexperienced and do not know the things that can be helpful for their survival. To stay in the wilderness state seems impossible to them. As Cook (2020) states their situation by saying that, Bea remembers those days and describes them as "Unpredictable, plain and brute". (p.5) But gradually they have learned to live there. They have started a new life by settling down in the wilderness state.

Wilderness has affected them positively. All the characters in the novel seem satisfied with their new home which they have named wilderness state. They have learned to survive there. They bring some goods with them but as time passes all get finished and they have to rely on the sources that are present there. Cook describes the situation of the community by saying, "the hunting bows and arrows, the bag of hollowed wooden meal bowls and the chips of wood and stone they used as utensils." (p.13). Cook tells the readers that the community that has started its journey with the food packages filled with fast food, has now become habitual to live in the wilderness. They have learned that life is much easier without costly food and clothes.

Wilderness as a panacea of the disease of humanity

Wilderness proves to be the ultimate cure for human suffering and diseases. Bea's little angel Agnes is the perfect example of this. She is the one who got cured by the company of the nature. Humans are suffering from the issue of climate change nowadays. The issue of climate change is making them realize that being in the company of woods is the best option. Agnes becomes so ill that there is no option for the community except to live in the wilderness state. Sometimes when Bea looks at her daughter she thinks with great pain and agony that her daughter is the little

survivor who fought the battle of her own life. She feels happy and satisfied at the same time she has made a good decision for the future of their children. Bea and other members of the community came to the wilderness state for the child and her health. As Cook (2020) says that, "Bea thought about all their original reasons for coming to the strange wilderness". (p.97) Some of the community just came for adventures. Some of them join the wilderness state for research, but it was Bea who came into the wilderness state for her daughter, she said this by saying that she has joined the wilderness because "To keep my daughter well". (p. 97). Her dialogues tell the horror stories of the life in the city. The fear of dying in the polluted environment of the city makes them realize that the ultimate cure for all diseases is in the company of the wilderness.

Bea and Agnes are not only two characters in the novel *The New Wilderness* but also the symbol of those generations who are struggling for their lives because of their faults. Bea belongs to that civilization who sacrificed their youth for the betterment of their children and future generations because she knew that to stay in the city is just to invite death. Cook (2020) talks about this situation by saying, "People escaping to far-flung places to get well. To take in the good air. To find health away from the place that allied them." (p.72). So it is quite clear that wilderness is not only the name of a place to live rather it is a way to get relief from the disturbances of urbanization.

One can understand from the dialogue of Bea that in how much intensity humanity is starving. Her friends and other members of the group are struggling to survive in the wilderness state and some of them thought of going back to their homes in the city but Bea remarked that if they would prefer to stay in the city then her daughter would die surely. Cook (2020) says about the remarks of Bea about the city and its life, "But if we stay, she will die". (p.72). Here, in this sentence the death of one person is not only the tragedy of a single person rather it is the tragedy of all the humans who are struggling in their fight for the survival of their generation. The future of coming generations is in constant danger because of climate change and the affected ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the discussion, it can be rightly said that Cook has unveiled the truth that wilderness is not all about the place that was associated with the concept of punishment rather it has become a place that has healing properties. In the novel, the textual references have proved that wilderness is a place that can be cherished. It has become a panacea to the disease of humanity. The perfect remedy for human afflictions and diseases is found in the wilderness. Agnes, Bea's little angel, exemplifies this perfectly. She is the one who has been healed by nature's business. Bea and Agnes are not only two central characters in the novel *The New Wilderness*, but they are also a metaphor for generations who are fighting for survival due to their flaws. Bea is part of a society that sacrifices its youth for the sake of its children and future generations when she realises that staying in the city is simply inviting death.

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