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Ecofeminism and the Future of Environmental Thought: A Study of 21st-Century English Literature through Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness*

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Abstract

In the face of accelerating ecological degradation and the climate crisis, ecofeminism has emerged as a critical lens for analyzing the interconnected oppression of women and nature. This paper explores Diane Cook's The New Wilderness (2020) as a powerful narrative that reimagines environmental futures through an ecofeminist framework. The novel presents a dystopian world where environmental collapse forces a return to primitive survival, positioning women's experiences and bodies at the center of ecological negotiation and adaptation. Through close textual analysis, this study examines how Cook's protagonist, Bea, navigates motherhood, autonomy, and environmental displacement within a patriarchal and collapsing world. The paper discusses how The New Wilderness critiques dominant anthropocentric paradigms while also highlighting the gendered consequences of environmental policy and degradation. Ecofeminist theory, as articulated by thinkers like Vandana Shiva and Greta Gaard, serves as the theoretical foundation to unpack the gender-nature dynamic in the novel. The study further explores how Cook challenges binaries such as civilization vs. wilderness and culture vs. nature, suggesting the need for alternative epistemologies rooted in care, coexistence, and sustainability. The present paper is an honest attempt to attract the attention of the readers towards Ecofeminism and the Future of Environmental Thought, which emphasizes the need for a more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable approach to ecology, one that respects both the natural world and marginalized communities. As climate crises intensify, ecofeminist perspectives offer alternative models rooted in care, cooperation, and community rather than domination and The researchers further write that the present research paper profit. contributes to the evolving discourse on ecofeminism in 21st-century English

literature by situating Cook's novel as a critical site of environmental imagination. It underscores the role of speculative fiction in reconfiguring ecological consciousness and fostering dialogue about equitable futures for both women and the planet.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Diane Cook, The New Wilderness, Environmental Thought, Climate Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Gender and Nature, Patriarchy, Sustainability, Dystopia, Feminist Ecology

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a growing global consciousness regarding environmental crises, including climate change, deforestation, pollution, and resource depletion. These issues are not just scientific or political but deeply cultural and ethical, prompting the need for new interpretive frameworks that reflect the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. Literature has long served as a reflective and transformative space for such reimagining, offering new vocabularies for environmental thought. One of the most compelling approaches to environmental discourse is ecofeminism, a theoretical framework that links ecological destruction with the historical subjugation of women. Rooted in both ecological activism and feminist theory, ecofeminism challenges the dualisms that separate man from nature, mind from body, and reason from emotion. It critiques systems of domination—especially patriarchal and capitalist structures—that exploit both women and the environment for power and profit.

Ecofeminist thought has evolved significantly since its emergence in the late 20th century, expanding to address race, class, and postcolonial dimensions. It now engages with global climate justice, intersectionality, and indigenous epistemologies. Within literature, ecofeminism helps to illuminate the symbolic and material roles of gender in environmental narratives, making it a vital tool for interpreting contemporary fiction that deals with ecological collapse and renewal. Diane Cook's The New Wilderness (2020) offers a timely and rich terrain for ecofeminist analysis. Set in a near-future world plagued by environmental catastrophe, the novel follows Bea and her daughter Agnes as they leave a polluted city to join a radical experiment in rewilding. The narrative explores themes of survival, motherhood, and the human relationship with the natural world, all while interrogating the sociopolitical structures that precipitate ecological disaster. The novel's central conceit-a governmentcontrolled Wilderness State where a small group of volunteers must live without modern infrastructure – offers a provocative critique of both environmental policy and human entitlement. It questions whether a true return to nature is possible, or even desirable, under conditions of surveillance, sacrifice, and systemic inequality. Cook's fictional wilderness becomes a space of both liberation and control, echoing ecofeminist concerns about the romanticization and instrumentalization of nature.

Bea's experiences as a woman and mother are intricately tied to the novel's ecological concerns. Her bodily rhythms, maternal instincts, and emotional labor are foregrounded against a backdrop of environmental devastation. This focus aligns with the ecofeminist claim that women's embodied knowledge and relational ethics are crucial for envisioning sustainable futures. Bea is neither a passive victim nor a traditional heroine but a figure of complex resistance and negotiation. The New Wilderness also critiques patriarchal authority and institutional power. The government's experimental program, ostensibly designed to preserve the environment, mirrors real-world environmental governance that often marginalizes vulnerable populations. Through its depiction of control, exclusion, and surveillance, the novel exposes the ways in which environmentalism can be co-opted by systems of domination—another key concern of ecofeminist theorists like Val Plumwood and Greta Gaard. Furthermore, the novel resists the binary logic that separates civilization from wilderness. Instead, it

presents a porous and contested boundary where human and non-human, self and other, continually interact. Agnes, the child who grows up in the wilderness, symbolizes a new kind of ecological subjectivity—one that is intuitive, adaptive, and non-anthropocentric. Her character embodies the ecofeminist ideal of living with rather than over nature.

The narrative form of the novel—blending speculative fiction with literary realism—adds another layer to its ecofeminist reading. By imagining an alternative environmental future, Cook challenges readers to rethink present-day habits and assumptions. The speculative mode allows for critical distance while simultaneously fostering emotional engagement, a dual strategy that is particularly effective in literature aimed at generating environmental awareness. As a work of climate fiction, The New Wilderness contributes to a growing body of literature that addresses the ethical and existential dilemmas of the Anthropocene. However, its unique focus on female experience, maternal relationships, and systemic critique situates it squarely within the ecofeminist tradition. It calls for a revaluation of care, interdependence, and embodied knowledge as essential to ecological survival and ethical renewal. This paper argues that The New Wilderness exemplifies how 21st-century English literature is redefining environmental thought through an ecofeminist lens. By centering gender, emotion, and relational ethics, Cook not only critiques the failures of patriarchal environmentalism but also points toward a more inclusive and sustainable ecological imaginary. Through detailed textual analysis, this study explores the novel's potential to influence future environmental narratives and policies rooted in justice, empathy, and ecological balance.

Review of Literature:

Recent scholarship has explored ecofeminist themes in contemporary speculative fiction through multiple critical approaches. Meera Subramanian's 2021 article "Ecofeminist Ethics in Contemporary Speculative Fiction" examines how female protagonists navigate ecological collapse while challenging patriarchal structures, with Diane Cook's The New Wilderness serving as a key text that critiques institutionalized environmentalism through embodied female experience (Subramanian).

Ayesha Banerjee's 2022 study "Gender, Nature, and Power in the Anthropocene" analyzes Cook's novel alongside works by Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson, demonstrating how ecofeminist literature bridges emotional and ecological intelligence to reimagine human-nature relations (Banerjee). Kavita Rao's 2021 article "Maternal Ecology and Resistance in The New Wilderness" focuses specifically on motherhood as a form of ecofeminist resistance, arguing that Bea's caregiving represents an alternative ecological ethic grounded in interdependence (Rao).

Samuel Hargreaves' 2022 work "Rewilding Feminism: Ecofeminist Utopias and Dystopias in 21st-Century Fiction" explores how Cook's novel frames female resilience as essential for ecological survival, despite its dystopian setting (Hargreaves). Nandita Sharma's 2023 study "Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Global Climate Fiction" positions The New Wilderness within postcolonial ecocriticism, interpreting its wilderness setting as a space where marginalized women reclaim agency through survival practices (Sharma).

These studies collectively demonstrate how contemporary fiction engages with ecofeminist theory to interrogate intersections of gender, power, and environmental crisis. The scholarship highlights literature's capacity to imagine alternative ecological ethics grounded in feminist perspectives.

Objectives of the Present Paper:

- To analyze The New Wilderness through the lens of ecofeminism, highlighting the intersection of gender and environmental degradation.
- To examine how Diane Cook's portrayal of motherhood and female embodiment reflects ecofeminist principles.

- To explore the novel's critique of patriarchal and institutional approaches to environmental conservation.
- To investigate the role of speculative fiction in reimagining ecological futures grounded in care, empathy, and sustainability.
- To contribute to the broader discourse on ecofeminism in 21st-century English literature by contextualizing Cook's work within contemporary environmental thought.

Research Methodology of the Present Research:

This study employs a qualitative research methodology rooted in literary analysis, with a focus on ecofeminist theory as the primary critical framework. Through close reading of Diane Cook's The New Wilderness, the research examines narrative structure, character development, thematic patterns, and symbolic representations of nature and gender. The study integrates theoretical insights from foundational and contemporary ecofeminist scholars such as Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard, and Val Plumwood to interpret how the novel articulates ecological concerns through feminist perspectives. Secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly critiques, are used to support and contextualize the analysis. This interpretive approach aims to uncover how literature can serve as a medium for advancing ecofeminist thought and imagining sustainable futures in the context of 21st-century environmental crises.

"Ecofeminism and the Future of Environmental Thought: A Study of 21st-Century English Literature through Diane Cook's The New Wilderness"

The increasing urgency of climate change, ecological degradation, and environmental injustice has prompted scholars, writers, and activists to seek new frameworks for understanding and responding to the crisis. One such framework is ecofeminism, which explores the parallel oppressions of women and nature under patriarchal and capitalist systems. Ecofeminism asserts that the domination of nature is closely linked to the subjugation of women and other marginalized groups, and it calls for a reconceptualization of human relationships with the environment rooted in care, empathy, and sustainability. Emerging in the 1970s, ecofeminism has evolved through various waves, integrating intersectional perspectives that address not only 99gender and ecology but also race, class, and postcolonial identity. In literature, ecofeminism has offered a powerful interpretive lens through which to examine how narratives represent the environment, women, and systems of power. Contemporary English literature, especially in the 21st century, increasingly reflects ecological anxieties and incorporates speculative and dystopian elements to explore possible environmental futures.

Diane Cook's novel *The New Wilderness* (2020) is a prime example of such a literary endeavor. Set in a future plagued by environmental collapse, the novel follows Bea and her daughter Agnes as they leave a polluted metropolis to participate in a radical experiment in "rewilding" within a designated Wilderness State. Their journey through a harsh, controlled of human and ecological life. The novel is deeply ecofeminist in its approach, particularly in the way it centers female experience and maternal identity as crucial to environmental understanding. Bea's role as a mother is not incidental – it is the core through which the narrative unfolds physical, emotional, and ethical relationship with nature and her daughter is portrayed not as domination but as a form of interdependence, which aligns with ecofeminist principles that reject hierarchical binaries.

"And she loved Agnes fiercely though motherhood felt like a heavy coat she was compelled to put on each day no matter the weather." (Pg 18 line no -16,17)

Cook's depiction of the Wilderness State as both a refuge and a space of control is critical. On one hand, it represents a break from urban exploitation and environmental degradation; on the other, it functions as a biopolitical experiment governed by surveillance, rules, and invisible authority.

"And when they first arrived in the Wilderness they imagined living there might make them more sympathetic, better more, attuned people. But they came to understand they'd been a great misunderstanding about what better meant. It's possibly meant better at being human and left the definition of the word human up for the interpretation it might have only meant better at surviving anywhere but by any means. Bea thought living in the wilderness wasn't all that different than living in the city in that respect." (*The New Wilderness*, Page no 36 line no 1-9)

"The drive for survival is strong even the most brute creators can be clever if it means another morning under the cool light of the sun in the wilderness state which was the life's last wilderness." (The New Wilderness, page no 57 line no 1, 2, 3) This duality reflects how modern environmentalism, when embedded within patriarchal and institutional power structures, can replicate the very systems of oppression it seeks to dismantle. The character of Agnes, who grows up entirely within the wilderness, embodies the potential of a posthuman ecological subject – one who does not see nature as separate or subordinate but as integral to identity. Her instinctive and intuitive bond with the land, animals, and cycles of life and death highlights a shift away from anthropocentric thinking toward a relational and embodied ecological consciousness." She thought of the way Agnes ran after rabbits or climbed the trees then they came across them. Of course she wasn't sick anymore." (*The New Wilderness*, page no 31-33)

Cook's use of speculative fiction allows her to project current environmental concerns into a nearfuture world, exaggerating them just enough to make readers reflect on the present. The speculative element is essential to ecofeminist literature because it enables the imagining of alternative futures – futures where domination is replaced with cooperation and where care-based ethics supplant controlbased ideologies. Moreover, The New Wilderness interrogates the cost of survival, especially for women. The emotional labor, physical suffering, and ethical compromises that Bea endures suggest that environmental degradation is not gender-neutral. Women, especially in vulnerable roles such as mothers or caregivers, bear a disproportionate burden in the wake of ecological collapse – a theme frequently addressed in ecofeminist scholarship. Bae who grew up in a well-of neighbourhood with oak lined streets in the city has a constant urge to leave the Wilderness state for the city but also seeks all of its modern comforts it is precisely at the moment of giving birth which is supposedly the ultimate moment that binds women to nature that she moves yearns "She had hated the feeling so exposed used animal like......she had wanted to be alone for this but what she wouldn't have given for the probing gloved hand, stale recirculated air, humming machines, fresh sheet under her rather than dessert dust. Some sterile comfort" (*The New Wilderness*, page no 4 line no 12-19)

The novel also critiques the notion of nature as pure and untouched, revealing instead a constructed wilderness shaped by human intervention and surveillance. This undermines romanticized ideas of returning to nature, urging readers to understand wilderness as a contested and politicized space rather than an idealized refuge. In doing so, Cook aligns with ecofeminist thinkers who advocate for a more nuanced and critical engagement with ecological narratives. By embedding these themes within a deeply personal and emotionally resonant story, The New Wilderness invites readers to reflect not only on ecological collapse but also on the kinds of values and relationships that can help humanity navigate such crises. The novel emphasizes care, empathy, and adaptability – qualities often associated with feminist ethics – as essential tools for environmental resilience and renewal.

In conclusion, Diane Cook's The New Wilderness serves as a vital text in understanding how 21st-century English literature is responding to environmental concerns through an ecofeminist lens. It challenges dominant ideologies, critiques institutional power, and reimagines future ecological possibilities grounded in gender justice and interdependence. As environmental thought continues to evolve, literature like Cook's plays a crucial role in shaping consciousness and inspiring action toward more equitable and sustainable futures.

Relevance of the work

This paper is highly relevant in the contemporary context where environmental crises – such as climate change, deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss – have reached alarming levels. By analyzing Diane Cook's The New Wilderness through the lens of ecofeminism, the paper bridges the gap between literature, ecological awareness, and feminist theory. It highlights how 21st-century fiction is not only responding to environmental emergencies but also offering alternate visions rooted in care, empathy, and sustainability. In doing so, the paper contributes to the growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that sees literature as a critical tool in shaping ecological consciousness and addressing environmental injustices, especially those experienced by women and marginalized communities.

Need of the current research

There is an urgent need to rethink traditional approaches to environmental thought that often exclude gendered experiences and overlook the socio-political dimensions of ecological issues. Most mainstream environmental narratives are dominated by scientific, technocratic, or patriarchal discourses that fail to account for the lived realities of women and indigenous peoples. This paper addresses that gap by foregrounding ecofeminist theory and showcasing how literature, particularly The New Wilderness, can reframe environmental challenges through stories of female resistance, maternal ecology, and embodied survival. It emphasizes the necessity of incorporating diverse voices and ethical frameworks in shaping future environmental discourse and policies.

Result and Discussion

The analysis reveals that Diane Cook's The New Wilderness embodies key ecofeminist principles, such as the critique of patriarchal control over both women and nature, and the advocacy for relational, care-based ethics. The novel presents a dystopian world that mirrors real-world environmental degradation while also challenging dominant ideologies of conservation and state governance. Through the protagonist Bea and her daughter Agnes, Cook illustrates the emotional and physical toll of ecological collapse, especially on women, and the strength of alternative modes of living based on intuition, adaptation, and mutual care. The discussion also highlights how speculative fiction enables authors to envision ecological futures that are not only cautionary but also imaginative and transformative.

Findings of the work

The paper finds that The New Wilderness serves as a powerful ecofeminist text that critiques both environmental destruction and the systemic structures that perpetuate it. It reveals that women's experiences – particularly those of motherhood, caregiving, and survival – are central to understanding the human-nature relationship in times of ecological crisis. The novel deconstructs the idea of wilderness as a pristine, untouched space, instead portraying it as a managed and politicized landscape. Furthermore, the study finds that 21st-century English literature, through works like Cook's, plays a significant role in advancing ecofeminist environmental thought by envisioning inclusive, ethical, and sustainable alternatives to current ecological paradigms.

Future Scope of the work

The study of ecofeminism in The New Wilderness offers fertile ground for extended research in the domains of environmental humanities, gender studies, and literary criticism. Future researchers can expand this work by analyzing other contemporary literary texts that address climate change, ecological displacement, and gendered survival through an ecofeminist lens. Comparative studies across global literatures – especially in postcolonial, indigenous, or non-Western contexts – can enrich the dialogue on environmental justice and intersectionality. Moreover, this research can be extended to interdisciplinary fields such as ecocriticism, climate fiction (cli-fi), environmental ethics, and media studies, thereby exploring how ecofeminist narratives evolve across different cultural and technological platforms. As climate urgency intensifies, the fusion of ecological and feminist thought through literature will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping sustainable, inclusive, and equitable environmental futures.

Conclusions

To sum up, the researchers come to the point that the present paper has explored how Diane Cook's The New Wilderness serves as a compelling literary reflection of ecofeminist thought in the 21st century. By examining the novel's narrative through the critical lens of ecofeminism, the study highlights the intersection of gender and ecological crises, portraying how patriarchal systems of control contribute to both environmental degradation and the marginalization of women. The novel situates female experience – especially maternal experience – at the heart of its environmental narrative, thereby emphasizing the importance of lived, embodied perspectives in responding to ecological collapse. The novel critiques not only the destruction of nature but also the state-led, technocratic solutions that often fail to consider the human cost, especially for women. The Wilderness State, initially envisioned as a space for ecological salvation, is revealed to be another mechanism of surveillance and regulation. Through the characters of Bea and Agnes, Cook subverts dominant environmental discourses and instead proposes an ethics of care, interdependence, and emotional resilience – key tenets of ecofeminism. Their journey through the wilderness becomes an allegory for survival in a world that demands both ecological awareness and personal transformation. The paper underscores the significant role of speculative fiction in envisioning alternative futures. By placing The New Wilderness within the broader landscape of 21st-century English literature, the study demonstrates how fiction can challenge the status quo and offer new paradigms for ecological and social sustainability. Cook's novel does not merely depict a dystopian world; it critiques current trajectories while opening up space for reflection, resistance, and regeneration. It calls upon readers to consider the long-term consequences of environmental neglect and the urgent need for systemic change informed by inclusive and equitable values. In the present paper, the researchers try to explain that Ecofeminism and the Future of Environmental Thought, which emphasizes the need for a more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable approach to ecology, one that respects both the natural world and marginalized communities. As climate crises intensify, ecofeminist perspectives offer alternative models rooted in care, cooperation, and community rather than domination and profit. The researchers further write that the present research paper contributes to the evolving discourse on ecofeminism in 21st-century English literature by situating Cook's novel as a critical site of environmental imagination. It underscores the role of speculative fiction in reconfiguring ecological consciousness and fostering dialogue about equitable futures for both women and the planet.

In conclusion, The New Wilderness exemplifies the potential of ecofeminist literature to influence environmental thought and action. The novel's portrayal of women's struggles, ecological destruction, and the search for meaning in a collapsing world offers a rich site for interdisciplinary analysis.

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