Rethinking 'Motherhood' in the Anthropocene: An Ecofeminist Reading of *The New Wilderness* by Diane Cook

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Abstract
A large number of recent climate fiction written by and about women deal with the challenges and anxieties of mothering in environmentally dystopian times. Analysing these narratives is crucial as they provide an opportunity to explore the connection between environment, gender, reproduction and the Anthropocene. This paper analyses The New Wilderness (2020) by Diane Cook, an exemplar of climate fiction, from an ecofeminist perspective. The paper will look specifically at how the novel presents motherhood in an eco-dystopia and how this representation speaks to the recent ecofeminist conceptualisation of motherhood informed by the concepts of postmaternalism and embodied ethics of care.
Keywords: Anthropocene, Motherhood, Ecofeminism, Postmaternalism, Embodied Ethics of Care.

The challenges and anxieties of mothering in environmentally dystopian times are a recurring theme in a large number of climate fiction that has been published in the past two decades. These works are written primarily by women from the Global North where climate change is discussed much more frequently in media and governance than in the Global South where its impact is most felt. Despite this limitation, these works open up new opportunities to discuss the crucial connection between environment, gender and reproduction that extends beyond the Global North and has been the subject of ecofeminist thought from its very beginning. This paper analyses The New Wilderness (2020) by Diane Cook, an exemplar of climate fiction, from an ecofeminist perspective. It will look specifically at how the novel presents motherhood in an eco-dystopia and how this representation speaks to the recent ecofeminist conceptualisation of motherhood informed by postmaternalism and embodied ethics of care.

Ecofeminism and Motherhood

In the most basic sense, ecofeminism is the idea that various forms of oppression, of environment, gender, sexuality, class, race, caste, etc. are interconnected and cannot be eliminated separately. Ecofeminism is a highly heterogeneous theory that, unlike the term suggests, does not exclusively deal with issues of nature and women. However, a genealogy of the idea can be traced, at least within the

Western context, as a matter of convenience. Ecofeminist discourse emerged in the 1960s and 70s through various movements that protested the environmental and health consequences of turning World War II technology into consumer products like nuclear energy and pesticides. While these movements have been documented most extensively in the United States and Europe, there were also activists like Vandana Shiva in India, Wangari Mathai in Kenya and several organisations in Latin America that were carrying out similar protests across the world, informed by their local, decolonial, anti-capitalist knowledge.

Motherhood was one of the most frequently employed rhetorical tools in early ecofeminist activism. For instance, "fear for the future of all our children and the future of the living world" was the rallying cry for these diverse women-led movements globally (Gaard 29). However, this was not without its own problems. Quite often, the ecofeminist invocation of motherhood reduced itself to mere maternalism, a position that women are better carers of the environment by virtue of being mothers. Not only does this universalise the experience of all women but also reduces both women and nature to their reproductive abilities. Such an essentialist position faced severe criticism not only from the outside but also from within ecofeminism. For example, Catriona Sandilands terms the trend of associating environmental activism and motherhood as 'motherhood environmentalisms' and explains how it is fundamentally anti-feminist and anthropocentric. According to her, these movements not only project the human child's well-being as the sole reason for environmental activism but also boil down women's political activities to mere 'maternal instinct' (xiii).

By the 1980s, the backlashes against ecofeminism were so severe that academicians feared to be associated with it. The term had become increasingly synonymous with mysticism and apolitical nature worship rather than theory and activism. The sensible critics of ecofeminism who wanted to look at issues of gender and environment without being essentialist and reductionist began using other terms like 'social ecofeminism', 'ecological feminism' and so on. For instance, Bina Agarwal proposed the idea of feminist environmentalism premised on the understanding that "people's relationship with nature, their interest in protecting it, and their ability to do so effectively, are significantly shaped by their material reality, their everyday dependence on nature for survival, and the social, economic and political tools at their command for furthering their concerns." (Agarwal 80). Agarwal's work not only challenged the essential connection between women, the maternal and nature but also drew attention to the importance of material relations in determining one's environmental experience and politics. Her claims were taken positively by most ecofeminists, especially in the West, and while they incorporated her key concepts, many continued to use the term ecofeminism (Gaard 35).

A renewed academic interest in ecofeminism is seen from the 2010s as the result of major shifts in humanities. The emergence of new materialist feminism, feminist science studies, climate studies, animal studies, posthuman feminism and so on turned theory's attention towards the material interconnections between the human and the non-human, an idea that had been extensively discussed decades back in the works of early ecofeminist theorists like Katherine Hayles, Val Plumwood, Donna Haraway etc. By bringing materiality and embodiment back into the picture, recent ecofeminist scholarship has also revitalised the discussions on motherhood and reproductive bodies in ways that are not essentialist. Instead of maternalism that centres on women's 'natural' propensities, ecofeminism today is centred on a feminist, embodied ethics of care that "calls attention to relationships, responsibility and experience and their cultural, historical and psychological contexts" (qtd in Phillips 5). Here 'mothering' is not instinctive to women, but rather a political conviction to care rooted in the recognition of our entangled materialities. Mary Phillips who discusses such forms of care in her essay "Embodied Care and Planet Earth: Ecofeminism, Maternalism and Post-maternalism", argues that this is a care that extends beyond

biological motherhood and one's own offsprings to include all relationships formed through corporeal and affective encounters, be it to other people, animals or the nature (Phillips 17).

Motherhood Narratives and Anthropocene

The ecofeminist understanding of motherhood as embodied care ethics is highly useful to analyse the increasing number of motherhood narratives that are part of Anthropocene fiction or climate fiction. This is because, with the ever-rising environmental challenges, there is also a widespread neo-liberal tendency to condense environmental issues to a matter of proper domesticity whereby 'good mothers' are expected to protect their children from environmental damages by prioritising family and developing better consumption habits (Avery 145). Sheena Wilson, an American professor, provides one of the best examples of this tendency in her short film 'Petro-Mama: Mothering in a Crude World'. Narrated in first person, the film follows a mother who is taking her extremely sick son to the hospital where the doctor gives her an overwhelming amount of information about her child's respiratory condition, the care and medication it requires. The mother, as she goes from pharmacy to pharmacy, trying to procure the medicines, hears " a cacophony of loving voices ask pointed questions" about what she feeds the child, if she keeps her house dust-free, if she gives him dairy, wheat or sugar, if she gives him vitamins on time, if she should give him steroids, if she over-sanitizes the house and so on. While feeling guilty and suspecting her own failure as a mother, she is also highly aware of the "chemical cocktail" emitted by the heavy traffic around her, the oil refineries spread across acres on both sides of the road that dissipate "the flammable residues of over 320,000 barrels of refined crude a day", the "ice fogs trapping particulate matter" suffocating her son and so on. Quite ironically, in a polluted world where Asthma has become an epidemic, society identifies the reason for a son's illness in the mother not buying organic or not keeping the house clean.

As the short film shows, the idea of a 'good mother' implies far more in the Anthropocene than ever before. In the context of environmental issues like toxicity, scarcity, rising temperatures and resultant economic and political troubles, it encourages women to be consumed in individualised caregiving and suffer from its failings while remaining blind to the politics of these issues. In other words, 'good mother' has become a tool to further reduce women into mere reproductive bodies and childcare providers. Further, the highly problematic Western discourse on overpopulation which attributes the responsibility of environmental damage to the increasing number of people and not the overconsumption and profit-making endeavours of a few, also adds pressure on women's reproductive decisions. While the widely popular media discussions in the West about the carbon footprint of procreation and the potential difficulties that future generations might face have a large number of young white people voluntarily leaning towards antinatalism, it is the women of colour, indigenous women, women of the Global South who are most often blamed for their reproductive proclivities. The deeply gendered popular Anthropocene discourse thus asks women to firstly reconsider their choice to have children, forces them to bear and care for a child in unsustainable environments and further holds them responsible for the care of children and their own bodies affected by environmental damages.

For these reasons, motherhood has become a major trope in recent climate fiction, especially the ones written by and about women. Novels like Barbara Kingslover's *Flight Behaviour* (2012), Claire Watkins's *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), Mireille Juchau's *The World Without Us* (2016), Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (2017), Maja Lunde's *The History of Bees* (2015) and so on are a few examples of such novels. However, all representations of motherhood in climate fiction are not inclusive, nor does it resist the hegemonic, neo-liberal, individualisation of social issues. Many novels merely represent the anxieties of mothers while not presenting any

political motivation towards the cause of the environment. Hence it becomes important to analyse these representations of motherhood in the Anthropocene and problematise the idea of the 'good mother', and more importantly the 'naturality' of motherhood.

The New Wilderness and Ambivalent Mothering

The New Wilderness by Diane Cook is a dystopian novel that, unlike most works of this genre, does not present a cliche post-apocalyptic landscape. It is set in a nearish future where things are terrible but still recognisable. The conditions in the novel did not arise as the result of one annihilating event like in many other climate fiction, but was the result of a slow descent. Though the novel does not mention what climate change has done to the rest of the world, by the time the novel begins, even rich white people are being affected by environmental issues. Pollution levels in the city are fatal and yet the idea of medical emergencies does not exist as "they were thought of more or less as fate" (135). There are still governments and industries and science and technology but none of it helps make the city liveable as the world's forests have all been destroyed except for a highly protected area called Wilderness State. The novel revolves around Beatrice or Bea and her daughter Agnes who moves into the Wilderness State along with twenty other people as part of a research project to see if human beings can co-exist without destroying the environment. The Community as they are called are governed by strict laws enforced by a group of men called Rangers. These laws include not settling in one place for more than seven days and not leaving even the minutest trace of their presence in a place. Bea and her partner Glenn who is a scientist decided to join the Community after finding out that eight-year-old Ages will not survive if she keeps breathing the air in the city.

The novel addresses the theme of mothering and its complexities from its very beginning through the character of Bea. When the novel opens, Bea is alone in the wilderness giving birth to a stillborn girl child. She pulls the child out of her, digs a hole in the ground and buries the child while keeping a pack of Coyotes from dragging out the buried body and feeding on it. Despite being unsure of having another child in the hostile environment, Bea names her Madeline and mourns her loss. This instance also starts revealing Bea's internal conflicts about motherhood. She looks at the mother Coyote who was training her kits to feed themselves on her dead child and contemplates how the expectations from her as a mother and her own desires diverge to a great degree. "It's what mothers did" (8), she thinks, looking at the protective and nurturing role that the animal mother assumes. However, despite birthing and burrowing and burying the child like an animal in the wilderness, she is nothing like the mother Coyote, her instincts cannot be more different from the maternal instincts she imagines that the animal mother, the 'natural' mother, the 'good' mother possesses. She, instead, yearns for her comfort, for a hospital bed with clean sheets, doctors and nurses and her mother to take care of her. But most importantly she yearned for the comfort of not having to have the baby in the wilderness of "survival so plain and brute" (3). The conflict between what is expected of her, what is believed to be innate to her as a biological mother, and what she experiences for real makes her a mother ridden with guilt. She fears that her child "died from not being wanted" (2).

Madeline's death is not the first instance where Bea has felt this conflict. Even as the world was slowly collapsing around her, she had found her place in the city. She had a job she loved and her mother nearby. It was when Agnes fell ill from pollution that Bea had to start making sacrifices. As her daughter's recovery seemed impossible initially, Bea, had secretly "started to think ahead, to a life after Agnes. She'd begun to say goodbye." (14). When Glenn proposed moving to the Wilderness state where the air was better, Bea was bound by the societal expectations to make that move to save her daughter. Her reluctance to move away from the city and into the wilderness

was a source of guilt. Protecting eight-year-old Agnes in the Wilderness State from the heat and cold, wild animals and hunger was an all-consuming responsibility that Bea soon lost herself in like a 'good mother'. Eventually, Agnes became the force that bound Bea to the wilderness. As her child was healthy and growing Bea could never return to the city with her even though she always harboured a deep desire to return.

Bea's ambivalence regarding her role as a mother gets stronger as Agnes starts growing distant from her. Agnes was a child of the wilderness who had very few memories outside of that of the Community's three years of survival. Her sense of belonging in the wild landscape alienates her from her mother who deep down fears that she will never belong there. From the beginning, mothering Agnes was to Bea "a heavy coat she was compelled to put on each day no matter the weather" (13). Her love for Agnes does not stop her from wondering "Did her needs not matter anymore?" (54). Her resentment towards her boundedness as a mother and the worsening of hostilities between rangers and the Community finally pushes Bea to flee the Wilderness state. Hearing the news of her mother's death in the city, Bea in the spur of a moment abandons Agnes and Glenn and finds a ride to the city. To Agnes Bea immediately becomes the "mean mother who ran away" (113) compelling her to be an adult at the age of twelve. To the rest of the Community, she became a 'deserter', a subject of numerous stories in which she died in the city, eloped with a ranger or started a new life in the mythical 'private lands'. She became the bad mother of the Community's ballads for giving in to her 'unmotherly' whims.

Here Bea's character breaks two assumptions about women that ecofeminists have identified as the reason for the interconnected domination of women and nature. Firstly, it questions the assumption that women are more 'natural' and that their bodies are essentially bound to nature through their reproductive capacity. Bea who grew up in a presumably well-off neighbourhood with "oak-lined streets" in the city not only harbours 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 most yearns "for a probing gloved hand, stale recirculated air, humming machines, fresh sheets under her rather than desert dust. Some sterile comfort" (2). Neither motherhood nor closeness to nature comes naturally to her. Bea's experiences throughout the novel stand to prove that women's connection to the environment, be it their ability to identify with nature or their political commitment to protect it does not derive from an innate association but rather from their dependence on nature for survival and their awareness of the interconnected existence of their self and the natural environment. This can also be seen from the contrasting experience of Agnes who felt a sense of belonging in the wilderness., Even as a child, she talks to the animals, learns from them, protects them and finds true kinship in the wilderness, which has not the least to do with her 'womanliness' but rather is a result of her conditions of growing up.

Secondly, Bea's ambivalent motherhood breaks the idea that mothering is a 'natural' condition connected to biological events in a woman's life. Giving birth to Agnes does not naturally elevates Bea to a 'good mother', but societal expectations about motherhood determine several of her actions. The idea of a good mother here is deeply problematic as "it is premised on the prior assumption that women are 'naturally' able and willing to sacrifice their own need and development in the interest of others" (Phillips 20). Bea's deeds of self-interest or in other words her 'unmotherly' actions do not end with her running away and abandoning Agnes but also reflect in her returning to the Wilderness state when she realises that there is nothing left in the city. Bea is a mother trying hard to cope with the more challenging societal expectations of motherhood that an environmental dystopia puts in front of her and fails to do so. Bea's failure holds a lesson supplemented by Agnes's experience. After Bea leaves, Agnes's observation of motherhood in nature helps her cope

with it, she " had noticed that a mother would only be a mother for so long before she wanted to be something else. No mother she'd ever watched here remained a mother forever" (116). At the end of the novel, Agnes, at the age of thirteen, adopts Fern, a little girl who lost her parents during the chaotic persecution of the Community by Rangers. Agnes's motherhood is one that she chooses, one that arises from a commitment to care in the face of hostilities. As Agnes and Fern are forced into captivity in the city's 'resettlement complex' made for the few Community members who survived, Agnes sneaks out with Fern to the marshes which seemed dead during the days and came alive at night, just so that Fern can experience what remained of the freedom of the wilderness. She recognises how her and Fern's survival and that of the outside world are all tied deeply to each other.

The New Wilderness is a novel that outlines how environmentally challenging times have deeply gendered impact as it further complicates the societal expectations from mothers as caretakers. The novel questions the idea of 'good mother' by presenting Beatice's conflicted biological motherhood and Agnes's chosen motherhood . From an ecofeminist perspective, the novel shows how 'natural' motherhood and 'maternal instinct' are both social constructs. Through Agnes, it redefines motherhood as an act of care that is more political than biological. Ultimately the novel shows how women's relationship to nature, just like their relationship to motherhood, is determined by the conditions of their living conditions, and the assumption of their naturality is merely a tool to subordinate both women and nature.

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