

The Necropolitics of Eden: Climate Apartheid and the Illusion of Sanctuary in Roz Dineen's *Briefly, Very Beautiful*

Dr. S.P. Visalakshi

Assistant Professor, English, Nehru Memorial College, Puthanampatti

Abstract

This article reads Roz Dineen's *Briefly, Very Beautiful* (2024) through necropolitics and postcolonial theories of displacement. It argues that the novel recasts the climate apocalypse as a continuation of colonial extraction and of the uneven distribution of death. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's account of necropolitical sovereignty and Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence, the article examines how the "Black Box" government and the eco-fascist movement Gaia enforce a regime of climate apartheid. Control over water, air and borders decides who may survive in fortified enclaves and who is left in the poisoned peripheries. The protagonist, Cass, a mother of three, carries this regime in her body. Her journey runs from the smoke-filled City, to the water-starved estate of her mother-in-law Eden, to a militarised border camp, and finally to the commune of Egleath. At each stage the promise of sanctuary proves false. Reading through the medical humanities, Cass's dehydrated, lactating and displaced body becomes the main site where necropolitical power is exercised and resisted. The article concludes that the novel's ending, an evacuation by sea, rejects the colonial dream of ownership and fortification in favour of fragile and mobile forms of care.

Keywords: climate fiction, necropolitics, climate apartheid, slow violence, eco-fascism, maternal body

Introduction: The Geography of Survival and the Architecture of Death

Briefly, Very Beautiful does not end the world with a single blast. It ends it by degrees. The electricity cuts out each night. Schools close on "Exceptional Danger" days, when chemical fires and wildfire smoke settle over the city (ch. 3; ch. 10). Deaths go uncounted. The government withdraws behind closed blinds and becomes, in the novel's words, "truly a black box" (ch. 6). Dineen even grounds her premise in the language of science. The line "It was no longer possible to secure a 'liveable future for all'" adapts a sentence from the 2023 synthesis report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, as her note on the text acknowledges (Dineen, "A Note on the Text"; IPCC).

The novel belongs to the growing body of climate fiction. Amitav Ghosh has argued that serious literary fiction long failed to imagine climate change and treated it as too improbable for the realist novel (Ghosh). Dineen answers that charge with an intensely domestic realism. Her book is full of nappies, sun cream, packed lunches and broken car keys. Yet its sharpest interest lies in who suffers. The apocalypse in the novel is not shared equally. It is sorted. Some people move north. Some are kept out. Some are left to breathe smoke.

This article argues that Dineen uses the control of water, air and borders to expose sanctuary as a neo-colonial construct. Cass's bodily journey, from the toxic City to Eden's dry estate and on to the militarised border, shows that survival in the novel follows the same extractive and exclusionary logic that governed the colonial world. The narrative names this logic itself. When Cass grasps the full extent of Eden's cruelty, she sees "an Old world pattern rising up to the surface" (ch. 51).

Theoretical Framework: Necropolitics, Slow Violence and the Somatic Archive

Achille Mbembe opens his essay "Necropolitics" with the claim that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (11). He builds on Michel Foucault's account of biopower, the management of populations through birth, health and death (Foucault). Mbembe argues that in the colony and the plantation, power often works less by fostering life than by exposing people to death. The result is the creation of "death-worlds," in which whole populations live under conditions that give them "the status of living dead" (40). Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the camp adds a spatial dimension. The camp is a zone where ordinary law is suspended and life is reduced to bare survival (Agamben).

The phrase "climate apartheid" gives this theory a present-day form. Philip Alston, writing as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty, warned of a future in which the wealthy pay to escape heat, hunger and conflict while the rest of the world is left to suffer (Alston). Mike Davis had already predicted that the rich would answer climate crisis by building private arks rather than sharing the burden (Davis, "Who Will Build"). In *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Davis also showed how imperial policy turned drought into famine across the colonial world (Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*). The capture of resources in a time of scarcity is an old colonial habit.

Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence explains how such harm stays hidden. He defines it as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attrition violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Poisoned air and failing water supplies are slow violence of exactly this kind.

The medical humanities and material feminism, finally, allows us to read the body as the place where these forces meet. Stacy Alaimo's idea of trans-corporeality holds that human bodies are always entangled with their environments and crossed by air, water and toxins (Alaimo). Astrida Neimanis describes human beings as bodies of water, linked to every reservoir and stream they draw on (Neimanis). Cass's thirst, her leaking milk and her strained lungs are the points at which the politics of the novel become flesh.

A note on position is needed. Cass is not a colonial subject in any literal sense. She is a white, middle-class Englishwoman whose husband's family owns land. Dineen knows this, and the novel keeps testing her privilege. The postcolonial reading offered here therefore draws on Aimé Césaire's insight that colonial violence comes home. Colonisation, he wrote, "works to decivilize the colonizer" (35). Dineen's England is a place where the methods once used abroad begin to be used within its own borders.

The Black Box and the Macro-Politics of Climate Apartheid

In chapter 6, Cass pieces together news of a conflict on a distant "Southern Continent" over "access to irrigated acres of salad crops" (ch. 6). The Black Box government has rented these fields "for a pittance, through antiquated agreement." When the local people, who are starving, take from them, the government sends troops. Their task is to make sure the "piped-in clean water went directly to wet the crops, which would be air-shipped away," and that it "bypassed the local population" (ch. 6).

The episode is a compact allegory of empire. Land is held through old contracts signed on unequal terms. Water is engineered to serve export rather than life. Soldiers guard pipes against "national extremists" who are, in fact, hungry people. Davis's account of colonial famine policy is close at hand, and so is Mbembe's claim that sovereignty is the power to decide who lives. Here the decision is made through irrigation. The government does not need to shoot the local population. It only needs to route the water past them. Thirst becomes a weapon.

The same government behaves in the same way at home. It pays out "the minimum to keep services barely going" and gives "no directives" (ch. 6). Rumour says it has moved "to the far north, with its families and advisors, its own teachers and doctors and police guards" (ch. 6). Later Jem confirms that Black Box officials are living a few miles from Egleath, "having a lovely time" (ch. 38). The retreat is the domestic version of the salad fields. The elite secures its own supply of safety and leaves everyone else to manage alone.

The border makes this abandonment visible. A wall has been built across the country, and Gaia patrols it. Near the end of the novel Arthur explains the arrangement. The Black Box wants Gaia's killings to stop. Its plan is to give the movement "their own places, Edens, like here." In return, "Gaia's part is that they enforce the border" (ch. 48). The deal is a land grant to a violent militia in exchange for policing the poor. Eden becomes a plural noun. The garden is now an instrument of state.

The border camp that Cass reaches is a death-world in Mbembe's sense. People queue through the night. The army arrives every two weeks to clear the camp and push bodies back, and the bodies return (ch. 29). Online, a news site keeps a running tally of deaths by pollution, by fire and now by Gaia, and Cass suspects that these approved figures "vastly underestimated the true numbers" (ch. 25). Death is managed, counted and hidden at the same time.

Eden's Estate and the Micro-Politics of Dehydration

Eden's house, in Part Two, first appears to be a refuge. The air is cleaner. "The chemical soup in the air was thinner," the children are "out of the reach of wildfire smoke," and they can stay outside all day (ch. 15). For a mother from the city this is close to paradise. The name of its owner is no accident.

The refuge soon fails. Eden admits that the water supply is "temperamental," and then it stops (ch. 18). The toilet cistern does not refill. Eden insists that Cass walk to a neighbour called Tim, who keeps a store of water. "It's three miles!" she says, and adds, "Dehydration can set in very quickly" (ch. 19). Before Cass leaves, Eden presses her into a thick tweed pinafore and insists on painting her mouth with red lipstick. "Do the arch," she instructs, her eyes fixed on Cass's lips (ch. 19).

Dineen narrates the walk through Cass's body. The handles of the containers cut into her hands. "The smell of breast milk leaking into the tweed dress was strong." Dehydration makes her urine "smell thicker than milk." Her bones feel as though they are "splintering under the weight of the water" (ch. 20). This is trans-corporeality in its most literal form. The water crisis passes straight through Cass. The milk she makes for her baby, Daisy, depends on the water she cannot get. Neimanis's bodies of water here become bodies in drought. The mother's body is where scarcity is registered, and also where it is handed on to the next generation.

Eden's control is subtle. She dresses Cass, paints her mouth and sends her alone to a strange man. While Cass is away, Eden gives the children an unnamed "medicine" and then drives off; Cass returns to find them heavy with sleep and fears they have been drugged (ch. 21). Much later Ella tells her, "Jem thinks Eden turned the water off herself" (ch. 51). The pieces fall into place. Cass reasons that Eden "had

exploited their fear that their loved ones might die of dehydration" and has made the young women "dance and debase themselves" for access to a basic resource (ch. 51).

This is slow violence inside the household. Nixon's term describes harm that unfolds out of sight and is not recognised as violence at all. Eden's sabotage fits precisely. No one strikes Cass. A tap simply fails. Eden "always had plausible deniability," as Cass reflects (ch. 38). The violence works through infrastructure, just as the Black Box works abroad. The household reproduces the state. Eden's estate becomes a small colony, with a controlling matriarch, a dependent younger woman and a resource withheld to secure obedience.

The Border Camp, Eco-Fascism and the Liminal Space

Gaia is introduced early as a climate group "organised exclusively by and for men" (ch. 4). Cass's husband Nathaniel reads its members as violent misogynists who have finally found, in the Earth, a woman who will not reject them (ch. 4). In their creed "the people, especially the procreating people, were parasites" (ch. 4). Their graffiti appears near schools, "wherever procreating people congregated" (ch. 4). Later, when Gaia begins to kill, "numbers were clearly all that mattered" (ch. 12).

Dineen's Gaia draws on real political currents. Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective have traced how far-right movements fold ecological language into nationalism and the defence of territory (Malm and Zetkin Collective). Sam Moore and Alex Roberts describe Eco fascism as an environmental politics that treats certain people as surplus and the land as the possession of a chosen group (Moore and Roberts). Gaia fits both accounts. Its love of nature is fused with hatred of women, children and the poor. It is necropolitics with a green face.

At the border camp, Cass meets one of its members. He kneels to the children's level and hands them "chocolate coins, which were wrapped in bright, gold foil." He tells them, "There is no reason to be scared." Then he shows Cass a wooden pendant "in the shape of an oak tree leaf" and leaves with the words "Gaia with you" (ch. 29). The scene frightens because it is gentle. The coins imitate both money and kindness, and they echo the false gift of sanctuary itself. The man wants Cass to remember his face. It is a threat delivered as a treat, and it is aimed at the children of exactly the "procreating people" Gaia despises.

The interview at the checkpoint the next morning shows a different form of power. The official handling Cass's case is bored and contemptuous. Cass understands that he "wanted her to tune in to him, to suss him out," and "to supply him with some version of emotion" (ch. 31). Arlie Russell Hochschild's concept of emotional labour, the management of one's own feeling to produce a desired state in another, describes what he demands (Hochschild). Miriam Ticktin's study of humanitarian care at European borders shows how protection is often granted to those who perform suffering in the expected way (Ticktin). Cass refuses the role. She decides there will be "no prettiness, no eye-gazing, no hero worship," and that she will not "plead prettily" (ch. 31).

The official answers with a threat to her motherhood. "What are you doing with them in your care? Are you fit? Are you sure? Because we can get that assessed" (ch. 31). The border's power to sort reaches into the family. It claims the right to judge whether a mother may keep her children. Agamben's camp, where life is exposed to administrative decision, takes a quiet bureaucratic form here.

Yet the scene is more complicated than a simple act of resistance. Cass's claim rests on title deeds. Her husband's family owns land on the far side of the wall. The official sneers that other people have lost "their primary residences," not "their second homes" or "their in-laws' third or fourth houses" (ch. 31). The

remark is spiteful, but it is also true. Dineen does not allow her protagonist to stand wholly outside the system she suffers under. Cass crosses the border by means of inherited property, the same logic of ownership the Black Box applies on the Southern Continent. Her refusal to perform is real defiance. It is also a defiance that her class allows her to afford. The novel holds both truths at once, and this is part of its honesty.

Eigleath and the Collapse of the Enclave

Eigleath, the commune where Arthur and Jem live, promises a better sanctuary than Eden's estate. It offers music, feasts, drums and children leaping from an old oak onto a trampoline. Its foundations, however, are rotten. Lance tells Cass that Arthur is "the dealer," that everybody knows him, and that he "is pushing on the people he shouldn't" because "they're too young" (ch. 45). Jem admits that she and Arthur have been "doing pick-up for Black Box" (ch. 38). Arthur finally reveals that he has sold Eigleath to the Black Box and is now a tenant on the land (ch. 48). Cass herself notices that the commune is "entirely white, entirely brattish" (ch. 44).

The enclave depends on the violence it claims to escape. Its wealth comes from drugs and from service to the government that tolerated the wall. Its whiteness mirrors the sorting at the border. In Mbembe's terms, it sits on the protected side of a line drawn by death. Nixon's slow violence is present too. The harm that funds Eigleath falls on young people outside the frame of the party.

The fires complete this logic. Arthur explains that local people "are starting fires further down, to stop the newcomers getting up" (ch. 48). Soon a rumour spreads among the wedding guests: "Gaia has Eigleath" (ch. 49). The tactic of exclusion turns back on itself. Fire set to keep migrants out reaches the commune. The enclave is consumed by the very method meant to protect places like it. Césaire's warning that colonial violence returns home finds a literal image here.

In the burning landscape Cass climbs one of the three wooden pyres that Arthur built as a party finale (ch. 47). She needs higher ground to breathe. On a pallet at the top, she kneels "with the fire at her back" (ch. 54). There she lets go of her absent husband. "I release him," she says, and then, "I release you" (ch. 54). She feels she could stay "on the pyre, forever. Breathing fire," and "witnessing her kingdom" (ch. 54).

The image is ambiguous. A pyre is a place of death and sacrifice, yet Cass climbs it to survive. Released from marriage, from Eden and from the promise of protected property, she gains a moment of clarity above the ruin. It is not a triumph. It is survival without illusions, a fugitive standpoint outside the structures that are burning. Her body, which has been dehydrated, decorated, sexualised and assessed throughout the novel, here becomes her own.

Conclusion: The Beckonless Kingdom

Briefly, Very Beautiful maps the necropolitics of climate collapse onto a mother's body. Cass breathes the City's smoke, carries water through heat, feeds a baby while she herself is thirsty, faces an official who questions her fitness and survives a fire set to keep strangers out. At every stop, the sanctuary proves to be a version of the system it seemed to escape. The Black Box hoards water abroad and safety at home. Eden hoards water in her house. Gaia guards land for itself. Eigleath lives on drug money and a deal with the state.

The ending refuses to restore any of these Edens. Cass and the children reach a beach where "dozens and dozens of boats" wait offshore, filled with hundreds of children the narrator calls "little evacuees" (ch. 57). Shortly before, drifting into sleep, Cass has dreamed of "a beckonless kingdom" in which "the waters

moved" (ch. 55). The sea replaces the walled garden. It cannot be owned or fenced. Survival, the novel suggests, will not come from the colonial habits of possession and fortification. If it comes at all, it will come from mobile and fragile bonds of care among the displaced. The final lines leave the children's voices carrying across the water, and they are "unafraid" (ch. 57). Hope in this novel is not property. It is a sound shared between boats.

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