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## Permaculture Havens: A Literary and Eco-medial Dopamine Boost Enchanting Towards a Promised Homeland for Ecological Minds

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**Abstract:** If we were to believe narratives of human origin, ever since man was ousted from the Garden of Eden, he has been cherishing a dream of recreating it or harboring the idea of “return to nature”. That deeply rooted enchantment to return to the original haven where the rivers ran down the valleys, and trees bore fruits and vegetables in paradisaical abundance. The plants were humanity’s first friend long before the dog. It must have been what Eric Fromm meant by having an affinity for “the passionate love of life and of all that is alive” (365). This article documents the rationale behind a long-standing trend that has recently been well-publicized. It is not going on a long journey all by oneself without having a word to anyone but celebrating each step, showcasing it before the world. Leaving behind a lucrative career or the most modern amenities, many people in their thirties and forties are after living their own lives far away from the maddening crowds, settling elsewhere inland, and setting up a piece of their own land off-grid, living off the land. This article also takes a peek into the role literature plays in bringing about such a mind change that made this phenomenon fashionable, which is not new but is very trendy even among Gen Z intellectuals. Both fictional and non-fictional works like *The Secret Life of Plants*, *What A Plants Knows*, *The Over Story*, *The Overstory*, etc., have inspired curious minds to set out on adventurous journeys, continuing the legacies of the Transcendentalists and Romantics from both sides of the Atlantic. Geocritical studies, as advocated by Bertrand Westphal(2011), shed light on the flexanimous potentialities of this literature. Social media and ecologically inspired literary work accelerate this movement among youth. Reflecting Ben Highmore's “a materialist turn towards the immaterial, towards affect, towards thingyness, the senses” (2011), this tendency demands academic engagements and intellectual intervention.

**Keywords:** *Affective landscapes, permaculture, ecological intelligence, ecological Bovarism, Geocriticism*

## Introduction

It is human nature to seek a measure of autonomy and independence, even in the worst times and forms of oppression and constraints, with our hands shackled in chains. Nelson Mandela, during his 27 years of imprisonment on Robben Island, repeatedly asked for permission to cultivate part of the rocky prison yard, but the authorities refused without giving any explanation; nevertheless, he was eventually permitted to do so. He later described it as, "A garden was one of the few things in prison that one could control. To plant a seed, watch it grow, to tend it and then harvest it, offered a simple but enduring satisfaction. The sense of being the custodian of this small patch of earth offered a small taste of freedom." (Mandela, qtd in Dobiecka and Wiederholt 42)

At some point in life, everyone reevaluates their existence. Not because a life unexamined is not worth living, but because they often experience bouts of depression—though not necessarily a pathological one—wondering about the purpose of their life. This may lead them to seek a new lease on life, a purpose-driven version of their life. As is quite common among people in their forties and fifties (Halvorsen et al. 1), many after spending around 25 years in education and training in their chosen field, then secure a position and excel in their careers. But at the peak, they make a U-turn towards their passion, choosing a slower life, often far from the mainstream. Many pursue their hobbies, while others are involved in farming, including permaculture, ranching, homesteading, and living off the land and the grid. This paper analyses the motivational factors behind a back-to-the-land movement that has become more visible across ubiquitous media worldwide.

Most of the source materials used in this study come from social media and YouTube channels, often shared as updates on what was happening on the practitioners' side. However, as an academic pursuit, a brief review of accessible sources has been conducted to examine how academia views the historical roots, evolutionary philosophy, and current trends, with a strong indication of their future direction.

Permaculture employs principles and practices to create sustainable human settlements. The portmanteau term, a contraction of both "permanent culture" and "permanent agriculture," was coined by two Australians: Bill Mollison, a charismatic and iconoclastic former forester, school teacher, trapper, field naturalist, and author of the comprehensive and encyclopedic guide, *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual*, and David Holmgren, one of Bill's earliest students, who has significantly broadened permaculture's scope (Hemenway 5).

The archetypal motif of a promised land originates in the biblical quote, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). The idea has persisted with various connotations ever since. A promised land does not necessarily have to be a holy land by divine covenant; for an ecologically minded person, it is a paradisaical mirror of an ecological garden, and therefore all their efforts are

directed towards “designing the ecological garden.”(Hemenway 36) With all those beings, Noah gathered in his Ark.

It is an international phenomenon. For example, in Sweden, there has been a counter-migration from urban to rural areas in recent decades, a 'back-to-the-land' migration of former urban residents relocating to rural areas and adopting mainly agrarian lifestyles. Through an analysis of 48 migration letters in which migrants describe their experiences moving from urban to rural areas to start farming, a 2022 study by Email Sandström investigates the underlying ideals and agricultural practices of the back-to-the-land phenomenon and discusses the potential significance of this form of agricultural migration for understanding broader sustainability. He adds that migration is a poorly researched area, and even when studies exist, they primarily address population redistribution rather than a return to nature. (Sandström 544–46) Back-to-the-land migration can be summarised as the intended adoption of a primarily agrarian lifestyle by individuals from non-agrarian backgrounds((Wilbur 149)

## Methodology

Textual analysis, as a methodology, does not limit its scope to the textual artefacts available in print alone. In this study, a large amount of digital content available on YouTube has been used, including several years of watchlists from subscribed channels and the comments of the followers, admirers and critics. It has helped to observe how such trends have gathered momentum over the years and where they are heading. Some of such contents look extemporaneously made, but a lot of effort has still gone into their making.

For over 10 years, with half of that time dedicated to purposeful observations and field trips, one of the contributors to this study immersed himself in people's lives, communities, cultures, social groups, and their social media groups, mostly on WhatsApp. This approach has helped us to observe and document emerging trends and aspirations of the people involved, many in the first person. Field notes, prepared on-site, and end-of-day reflections have informed this paper. The conversations the researcher had with many individuals revealed their plans following their current professional assignments. They expressed a longing to return to a rustic life, to reconnect with the soil that feeds them.

Virtual, online, or digital ethnography played a key role in collecting thematically selective digital media inputs. Netnography, as it is also known, uses the same immersion principles and practices, but the “field” is the virtual world of ubiquitous connectivity. Therefore, this study has an autoethnographic dimension. The community interact through screens rather than geography. The researcher examined the cultural and conceptual frameworks as expressed and shaped in social media, online forums, YouTube channels, Facebook communities, WhatsApp, and Telegram groups.

It must also be borne in mind that those field notes focus not on detailed statistics or expense logbooks, but on understanding their meanings and intentions, and on exploring what motivates them and sustains their spirits to pursue a chosen life, unknown to them until then. The participant observer truly absorbed the participant's life, hopes, thoughts, behaviours, and aspirations, understanding how they make sense of their actions both in person and online.

### **Motivational Spectrum**

The motivations for this trend vary, including personal, professional, and literary influences, as well as social media impacts and ecological concerns. Among individuals, there is a movement towards relocating to remote, low-profile farm setups to spend their lives growing their own food, living more or less off the grid, and being self-reliant. A few reasons are listed below.

1. Burnout from a high-pressure job: In modern times, most high-profile career phases are too demanding, and there are several deadlines to meet, and several things should be attended to at the same time, driving one into a chronic state of disquiet.
2. Health concerns of city life: In a capitalistic corporate world, the high-level jobs are situated in cities, and people migrate from villages where they were born and brought up as they climb the career ladder. But after a while, they seem to have had enough and start pondering over the journey back home.
3. Eco anxiety: Being fed by media and attested the same by personal experience, people grew up anxious about what would happen a few years later in their immediate living environment.
4. Professional hazards: Being in an enclosed, densely populated workspace can lead to the appearance of symptoms of some chronic diseases, not to mention the risks associated with jobs like mining or those that require extensive travel.
5. A longing for autonomy: After working for years for a company or in an office, people feel like they are not in control or that they are living for somebody else. In response, they find ways to live their own lives on their own terms.
6. Financial Independence and Retire Early: At some point in their employed life, many have received instructions for planning for financial independence and early retirement to live as they like. Most often, they turn to a rural off-land life.
7. Biological and psychological needs for nature: they can stem from physical issues like dust allergies and water supply problems, as well as psychological concerns such as sensitivity to noise or light pollution and a desire for fresh air and outdoor space to walk in.

8. Literary narrative influence: Some well-read scholars might be under the spell of their favourite nature writer and choose a life on a rustic farmyard producing most of the food they need.
9. Ecomedial influence: Some are just inspired by both still and moving visuals of village and agrarian life, and a simple but healthier, slow-paced lifestyle in earth stewardship.
10. Cultural shift from Anthropocene to symbiocene (Work with nature): After working years, as the modern scientific studies posit, which is mostly against nature, there is a tendency to team up with nature.
11. Reaction to hyper abstraction of the digital economy: It emerges from a realisation that they are just an invisible presence in the chain of things, and their presence is well paid but hardly acknowledged. So, they need to see with their own eyes what all the things they do in response are. In permaculture, everything we do is visible in its outcomes before one's eyes.
12. Back to the land migration: It is a cultural phenomenon where people try for a counter migration from urban to rural, as opposed to a civilizational population shift that has started from time immemorial.

### **Media Exposure and Microlearning**

YouTube offers inspiring, authentic visuals that invite viewers to explore the permaculture journey, such as *The Weedy Garden* and *Aanandaa Permaculture Farm*. Weedy Garden is managed by David Trood, widely known as Weedy, an Australian-born photographer and filmmaker. After 35 years in professional travel and business photography, he settled in Cawongla, Northern New South Wales, Australia, a subtropical rural region in the Northern Rivers area, where he established a permaculture habitat. He says "When I think of paradise, I think of a garden. It's like a home inside a home." (Trood).

Aanandaa Permaculture Farm is another YouTube channel by Manisha Lata Gupta, who left Mumbai after 20 years on the corporate career ladder, progressing in her career, and started a five-acre permaculture setup in Panchkula, India. Both channels demonstrate exemplary work in establishing human habitats where people grow their own food with a sense of ownership and in tune with nature. Several such channels are available in local languages. Crowd Forestry advocates Miyawaki-style forestry, Daskshina promotes an alternative lifestyle, and Life on Roads appeals to more adventurous individuals ready to embrace life. Kiss the Ground is another YouTube channel that shares experiential knowledge about regenerative agriculture. TV channels and podcasts, now easily accessible on YouTube, also exert significant influence. "ABC of TV Gardening" and "Around the World in 80 Gardens" are just two examples from the BBC.

### From the world of ideas into the wilderness.

Semitic religions believe that humans were first created in the Garden of Eden and, by virtue of their own actions, the first man and woman were expelled from their original heavenly abode. However, humans carry that ancestral garden in their minds, and whenever they can, they try to recreate a similar paradise in their gardens. The English word "paradise" has its origin from the modern Persian and Arabic word 'fir'daus' ('Search "Paradise" on Etymonline') which is quite similar to the Malayalam word "Parudeesa" (*Sabdasagaram* 2855) The idea is that the same word is used for both heaven and a garden. The Arabic word "Jannah" also means heaven, as well as a garden and an orchard. Modern men tend to create a lost Eden by returning to the land they once belonged to.

Literary works have inspired an intellectual escapade and a search for meaning elsewhere, far from mainstream life. The romanticised accounts of nature by English Romantic writers like William Wordsworth and John Keats had their share of followers who sought a rustic life in the wilderness in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Across the Atlantic in North America, transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote extensively about nature and the wilderness. Thoreau borrowed an axe, set out into the wilderness, and built a small cabin for himself, farmed at Walden Pond, and lived there for 2 years, 2 months, and 2 days in the lap of nature from 1845 to 47. This event continues to inspire people, even though it dates back to 1845.

William Henry Hudson, the man whom "The London Times", in its 1922 obituary, judged "unsurpassed as an English writer on nature," had American parents, who were New Englanders who immigrated to Argentina in the 1830s to try their hand at sheep farming (Symmes). He was born in the South American wilderness and enjoyed his childhood roaming the wild landscape among birds, rivers, and forests. His 1904 book *Green Mansions* is a tribute to that wilderness. The places mentioned in the literary work and the effects they leave on readers are among the key concerns of geocritical analysis, which align with "literary cartography".

"I had a farm in Africa at the foot of Ngong Hills", so begins the Danish writer Karen Blixen's 1937 memoir *Out of Africa*. She lived (1914–1931) on a coffee farm near Nairobi in British East Africa (now Kenya). Although the coffee plantation was a financial failure, her effort to recreate that farm life in a book was phenomenally successful. Edward Abbey wrote his philosophical memoir, *Desert Solitaire*, in 1958 after spending months alone in the American Southwest desert. He lived in a trailer, travelled long distances across the empty desert without electricity or running water, surrounded by silence and isolation. Both works evoke an affective landscape in readers that captures and refuses to let go, not only for the authors but for every nuanced reader.

In addition to classic literary works, several popular books have made people rethink their lives, directly or indirectly. *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, *One Straw Revolution* by Masanobu Fukuoka, *The Good Life* by Helen Nearing & Scott Nearing, *How to Grow More Vegetables* by John Jeavons, *The Secret Life of Plants* by Peter Tompkin and Christopher Bird, *Gaia's Garden* by Toby Hemenway, *The Have More Plan: A Little Land -A Lot of Living* by Ed and Caroline Robinson. *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* by Wangari Maathai, are a few to mention among several others, drawing on various disciplines such as science, philosophy, and economics.

When large screens began to dominate print media, revolutionary changes started to occur. Moving visual content allows people to see exactly how things would look, helping them to experience the changes they wish to make. Films and documentaries like *Into the Wild* (2007), *Captain Fantastic* (2017), *The Need to Grow* (2019), *Kiss the Ground* (2020), *The Biggest Little Farm* (2018), *Living the Change* (2022), and *Living Soil Film* (2018 by Soil Health Institute) are a few to count. *How Old Are You* (2014) is a Malayalam movie that made visible changes in Kerala, inspiring several people return to the soil to grow something of their own without pesticides, akin to the changes brought about by *Silent Spring* in the US of the 1970s.

Many social media visuals are designed to be attractive, often enhanced with AI tools. This directly influences the human mind, making them feel that their own actions are insignificant. It contributes to romanticised portrayals of people living in rural areas, often highlighting only the brighter side of their lives. For every interest, there is usually a group or several, depending on the members' preferences. This offers a valuable service, as members receive real-time clarification and build field knowledge that would otherwise take years to acquire. Networking with like-minded individuals is another advantage, allowing them to connect with a wider community of a trade or hobby. Even some early-career researchers harbor the hope of starting a garden or farmhouse after working a few years full-time.

Many had tried it earlier, as Juli and Vivek retreated to Mysuru in 1985, long before natural farming became fashionable (Down To Earth, 1:00). However, people once regarded them as eccentric or as pursuing unconventional intellectual pursuits; now, prominent figures are following the same path. This shift alters public perception. Alongside the rise of concepts like FIRE (Financial Independence, Retire Early), there is also a growing desire among individuals to take initiative and do things independently. thing on one's own. It has been found that people have an inner calling to do something on their own, and they go for it.

The COVID-imposed isolation is usually cited as a signpost of an evolution towards a back-to-nature movement, prompting men and women to reflect on what we really need to live. It does not mean that no one has dared to go far off to farm, leaving a lucrative position behind earlier. There are several pioneers in that direction. However, such career migration or if not, an internal paradigm shift in perception, has accelerated during the COVID breakdown.

People often begin contemplating their own contribution in their forties (Halvorsen et al. 1) and are more inclined to venture into a startup than to continue working for someone else or another organisation. The type of autonomy people value in the second half of their lives might influence their willingness to take risks on unlikely battlegrounds with audacity. Although it may have been realized through years of reflection and planning, things can suddenly take flight one fine morning. They often keep many Plan B options in reserve to support themselves if things don't turn out as expected.

Historically, it has been easier to trace certain movements, though less so by definition, but they have gained wider recognition in scholarly discourse. Examples include Victory Gardens in America during World War II, personal vegetable plots on the US home fronts during the war (Day 2) and they experienced a revival in the 1970s with the Back to the Land movement. Their resurgence in 2018 in the form of the Climate Victory Garden, as Green America campaigned for and had 24000 registered gardeners in 2020 (Day 2). Dig of Victory is its counterpart in UK. Other major practices include regenerative agriculture (Rodale Institute), natural farming (Masanobu Fukuoka), organic farming, holistic grazing (Allan Savory), Seed Sovereignty (Vandana Shiva), ecological farming, and Grow Your Own Movement, to name a few.

### **Ecological Boverism?**

Ecological concerns have always been a strong point in permaculture, driven by ecologically intelligent folk. Ecological intelligence, as Daniel Goleman popularised it, is “our ability to adapt to our ecological niche, ecological refers to an understanding of organisms and their ecosystem, and intelligence connotes the capacity to learn from experience and deal effectively with our environment” (Goleman 43). However, since people often have a highly inflated vision of their own capacity to act on it, the same does not always necessarily work out as intended.

As with any other phenomenon, this quiet and steady social change has faced its share of criticism. It has been described variously as an elite retreat, eco-aesthetic branding, the choice of the privileged, rural gentrification, lifestyle branding, privileged retreat, and escapism rather than systemic engagement with social and environmental commitments. Social media-induced dopamine boost has driven some to set out on such adventures. As is quite apparent, there are examples of discarded gardens after initial enthusiasm subsided due to a lack of preparedness and planning.

Such backlash can be interpreted as ecomedial Bovarism because it involves a false identity induced by overexposure to idealised visuals of an agrarian lifestyle. Bovarism, famously from the titular heroine of *Madam Bovary*, is "a conception of oneself as other than one is to the extent that one's general behaviour is conditioned or dominated by the conception, especially: domination by such an idealised, glamorised, glorified, or otherwise unreal conception of oneself that it results in dramatic personal conflict" (*Bovarism- Merriam-Webster*). This definition best fits the people, mostly youngsters, backing away from such seemingly heroic adventures, driven by their inflated expertise in horticulture and a life bound to green living.

## Conclusion

There are several countercurrents at play within popular culture and permaculture retreats. It is true that many people are preparing for a permaculture habitat by systematically learning from sources such as books, YouTube, MOOCs, and social media, and planning accordingly. Often, amidst a lot of negativities, many are safeguarding themselves with plan B or a diversified portfolio (Wint Wealth, 9:30). Among other things, they often secure other sources of income to support themselves. Numerous instances of people backing out after trying, feeling disenchanted, are not just isolated cases. The visuals look great and appealing, making people believe they can also establish something similar. It is not everybody's cup of tea for sure. However, all that really reaches people are just success stories, and we need more of them.

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