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Humanism and Self-Actualization in a Post-Apocalyptic World in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

Cormac McCarthy is known for his practical writing, simple sentences and ordinary themes of life. He is the author who proclaimed that literature is one that talks about the incidents between life and death. All his novels deal with a variety of travel either intended or unintended by his characters. The author uses 'road' to carry his ideas and characters. The characters though simple and plain are complex as well. He is known for his unique prose style and ignoring grammar and punctuation rules. His language is plain with descriptions sometimes violent. He is a rare writer to be in interviews because he has told that there's nothing for him to say. Everything he has to say is there on the page. McCarthy's portrayal of a Post-Apocalyptic future is a fascinating and challenging one to the readers. The Post-Apocalyptic world of McCarthy is a desolate land with grey air and remnants of humanity fading away into oblivion. Cannibalism is found everywhere and the civilization is left

beyond saving. The novel accounts the journey of an unnamed father and his son called the 'man' and the 'boy' heading towards South for a safer future but the man awaits doom on them within a couple of days. They are referred to as 'the good guys' who will not succumb to any act of violence in their journey. The man with a heavy heart wants to save the boy from the disgusting and annoying surrounding, wanting his son to always carry 'the fire'- the fire of humanism and prove to be 'the good guys'. The man in spite of the disastrous circumstances tries to teach the moral and the ethical values of life for his son to uphold in any of the situations he comes across in future. He knows that in future the presence of the father figure may or may not be with his son, but he wants his son to hold on with the values of life which he slowly inculcates in him.

Keywords

Fire; Post-Apocalypse; Self-Actualization; Death; Decay; Silence.

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McCarthy's novels deal with travel and the travel though different, takes place only as a wandering in *The Road*. McCarthy is a writer who thinks semicolons, exclamation point and even quotation marks as unnecessary. He prefers declarative sentences and conjunctions to connect his ideas. He is very brilliant in producing nihilism in his works. He is known for his existential nihilistic writing. This nihilistic attitude is showcased by the author to warn the readers against their desire of material and physical powers developing selfishness in them and forgetting the Almighty which in turn paves way for the holocaust. He wants to give the message that no one will save them or help in any way except for God. The novel *The Road* (2006) talks of an unknown catastrophe that struck. America and its civilization are gone, gone forever. Everything is decayed and dead. The man and the boy travels in this scenario

holding hope within them as a strong weapon and heading towards South believing to have a scope for them.

The purpose of the author to portray such nihilism is that, the novel can be analyzed in a metaphorical means than real. The travel of the father and his son is a metaphorical representation of the journey of the human race in the road called 'life'. The death of humanity, decayed civilization and rotten corpses on the road encountered by the father and his son has layers of meaning in them. The dead and decayed landscapes and the ruins represent the remnants of humanity fading away into oblivion.

The world shrinking down about a raw core of particle entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (McCarthy 75)

The charred images, perished human race, abandoned houses represent the lack of faith in God which led to the destruction. People of the super modern era take efforts without trusting God and lead a life with materialistic outlook rather spiritual. This attitude will finally meet with doom and destruction. This echoes throughout the novel and comes as a short message to the readers. Absence of God in the novel led to despair, destruction, and ruination. Charred images and lifelessness reflect T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, where the land is dry, lifeless, and abandoned- the representation of the human life without faith.

The father wants to save his son and he knew that the Pre- Apocalyptic world cannot be rebuilt. "He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he" (McCarthy 130). Just to escape the present destruction, he along with his son heads towards South hoping to find

safety and civilization. The only weapon they carry as they travel is the 'fire' in them. The hope is the only strength that leads them throughout their journey. Everywhere it is grey including the air.

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (McCarthy 110)

The sight they see is the ruins, desolate lands, burned houses and trees, blackened light poles, abandoned road works etc. The man assumes it to be the month of October. "Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years" (McCarthy 2). The absence of a calendar shows that there is no use of time in this world which has lost its meaning of existence. There is no sign of recovery anywhere. The wind blowing is felt by the father as dead which is a non-progressive motion. "The soft ash moving in the furrows. Stopping. Moving again" (McCarthy 94). "The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air" (McCarthy 14). These lines tend to mean the loss of society and a common social order.

Remarkably, the author uses the road as a symbol of the life of the entire mankind. As a humanistic novel, it greatly talks about the father-son relationship and the close bonding between them in an age where people are roasting their own children due to starvation. They move through deserted houses, scouring for food, fighting the bitter cold and snow, and hiding from other survivors who could be looters or cannibals. But, the father seems

motivated to ignore the hopelessness in the surrounding world to keep him and the boy alive as long as possible. As they travel the only mantra that the father is chanting to his son is that they are 'good guys' who carry the 'fire' in them. The fire represents humanism unlike the cannibals the society has become. They cite a barbequed child, parents eating their own children for survival. These are some of the violence shown in the novel. Physical condition of both the father and the son are deteriorating. The father is protective and is almost apologetic for bringing the son into this terrifying world. The father loves his son unconditionally which is shown in the following lines:

My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?

Yes.

He sat there cowered in the blanket. After a while he looked up. Are we still the good guys? he said.

Yes. We're still the good guys. (McCarthy 65)

The father is willing to be ruthless and takes more risks to survive, unlike his son. The son is on the other hand, more compassionate. He represents the goodness that believes in helping others. The readers can see this when the son sees a little child and wants to help him. But his father insists that they continue moving. In another incident, a thief runs away with their belongings. The father catches the thief and wants to push him but the son pleads with the father not to be cruel. All this shows the father is analytical and sharp. These are the characteristics of self-actualization.

The mother of the boy commits suicide after the child birth. She is in fact not ready or determined to live in such a world of horror and cannibalism. She insists her husband to kill their child and commit suicide like her. But the man refused to do so because he believes that God had sent him to protect his child and that he would kill anyone who touches his son. The father gets bad dreams which he positively thinks that it could be a way out of their present state.

Dreams in any other works of McCarthy show the character a way out but in this novel it is worsening the strength of the characters by stopping their motivation to fight back the circumstances and cause the characters to give up. Contrarily the man is not ready to give up. Everywhere the father and the son are surrounded by darkness. At a deeper level the father realizes that their journey is senseless and vain in terms of a future and a new beginning. The challenge in the mind of the man to exist in the world of horror changes only towards the end of the novel when he fully attains self-actualization.

When the man and the boy reach the man's childhood house, the boy is so scared by the silence and isolation of the house. The boy wants to move out immediately out of fear. It is important for them to move day after day in order to keep up their hope of survival. The earth once rich in everything, a planet with lives and happiness, with choices and opinions, with love and affection now stands lonely lacking all the goodness in it. This is because man exorted much power that led him to make decisions which would challenge the environment around him. He was behind the power and the glory which resulted in anarchy and chaos.

As Newton's third law suggest that every action has an equal and opposite reactions, so is the condition with the environment. When man takes a step further, the nature reacts twice. And the consequence is a haunted world, an apocalyptic world with diseases and starvation leading to cannibalism and destruction. So the world depicted by McCarthy is the result of pride and materialism, selfishness and authority of human beings over money, power and Nature. This depiction of the world is more real than fictional. The snow is called the nuclear- snow which affects the lungs of the father who coughs blood throughout the novel but buckles his life to save the life of his son.

The father and the son see so many incidents like roasting of a child, locking up humans naked and the road- agents who hunt human beings.

When the boy sees a barbequed child he questions about creation. Because in the post- apocalyptic world, there is always a question of creation everywhere and the boy knew only about death and destruction. He has not seen the sun right from his birth. The only environment he is aware of is the nuclear winter, darkness and desolate lands. This incident can be traced back to McCarthy's second novel *Outer Dark*, where Culla and other characters sees only darkness surrounding them always and once Culla dreams of a world without the sun or even sun turning black. In this novel, the boy has not seen what happiness is and what it really meant. It's because he was born on the eve of destruction and everything he saw was loneliness, sorrow, helplessness, threat etc... The happiness of the father is only through the memory of his wife. The man is not sure of their safety so he plans to shoot his son if they are caught by the cannibals who will roast and eat them.

But in the context of the still burning holocaust of the world 'the fire' represents at least the sacred fire of the human spirit which is seen in the man and the boy, in opposition to the demonic fires of apocalypse. He teaches his son to use the gun if they are captured. In spite of the worsening condition, the father teaches the son to pray, to hold on despite his absence. He instructs his son that even if he is not there with him he can talk to him and setting himself as an example before his son to perceive and follow. "You have to carry the fire" (McCarthy 234).The father succeeds inculcating the basic humanism in the boy which becomes clear to the readers when the boy is ready to share his food with an old man they met on the road or when he tries to help an injured man. This gives a sense of satisfaction to the readers who are exposed to the rotten truth of the world or its mankind who have turned to be cannibals that at least the boy is good hearted in this brutal world.

The boy's compassion and empathy talks deep into the readers' heart and mend their consciousness to carry the 'fire' within them forever. It is known to the readers that in such a cold blooded world, the only upholding

truth is that the bond and love between the father and the son which keeps them going. This morality makes their life meaningful unlike the other nihilistic existence. In all the problems, despair, loneliness the man teaches the boy to live up to the moral code.

Both the father and the son can be compared with Rinthy in *Outer Dark* who is an embodiment of innocence and purity and is metaphorically compared to 'light'. Since Rinthy has a good heart she is sheltered, fed and offered many other help from the people who wishfully comes out of their way for her assistance. Likewise, the father and the son are pure at heart and the son with compassion, which makes their escape from all severe situations and each time they fall tired without food they are guided to a bunker or a house or a boat which is full of food stuff.

The father can be seen in the state of self-actualization. As Abraham Maslow states that self-actualization is obtained only when the basic needs of a human being is met. Contrarily, the man attains self-actualization when they are in a gruesome condition where the basic needs itself becomes a question mark. This self-actualization in him makes him to be a lovable father in a world of cannibalism. He is able to judge the situation correctly to some extent and act accordingly. The man is very analytical, careful of the surroundings and the survivors, sharp in helping others, independent, true to his self and wanted to solve the problem by himself which actually is unsolvable.

The man appears mentally stronger than before towards the end of the novel. He recalls his wife's words that if he is not following her advice, he will have to face the reality but will not have the strongest mind to accept it. So she wanted him to commit suicide along with the baby before he could face the harsh world. With these words of his wife in his mind he comes to a conclusion towards the end of the novel that what she said was in fact right. If he has to face the reality, he has to succumb to the cannibals or looters who will kill them. If he does not want to face the reality then, he can save himself and his

son by drifting apart. So, he feels what his wife said was right. He does not have the guts to face the reality whereas; ignoring the reality will really help them in some way out. This attaining of knowledge he gets only at the end and gains strength to hold his breath and reach their destination to safeguard his son.

When the father is shot by a man with an arrow, he holds his breath to save his son but the pacing becomes slow yet determined. After reaching the sea shore slowly he loses his hope but does not want his son to find it. So he strengthens his son saying that his son can talk to him whenever he wants even after his death thus building the hope in him. The man finds a sailboat and swims to it and happy to find food in it. The sailboat is called as the bird of hope which gives him hope and strength again to face the reality that is, his death. Leaving his son behind is not a concern for him now because he is confident that his son can live and fight back all alone. The father gets a sense of satisfaction because he has developed the quality of individuality and independence in his son. He also strengthens his son talking about the 'fire'- "It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (McCarthy 279). He is not worried now because he knew that the fire his son carries will surely help him out of the present state in spite of his absence. The night falls and the man too falls asleep but forever unlike the night. The boy stays talking with his father for three days through which he gains the power to fight back loneliness and fear by breaking the killing silence. Not disappointing the readers as well as the hope of the father, the son finally lands into the hands of a 'human' with love, bonding and fire as well.

Thus the father attains self-actualization in a world of destruction and planted the seeds of goodness in his son by teaching him to pray and insisting him to carry the 'fire' always thus giving him the meaning of existence. He also taught his son to find the difference between a good and a bad guy. If he spiritually tamed his son he also has physically trained him to fight back by

teaching him to use the gun or to take right decisions in the right time. Thus the father builds humanism in his son and the goodness in the man and the boy made him to finally find a 'good guy' like him also with the 'fire' to fight the evil. Obviously, the author emphasizes the exceptionality of the main character with his inexplicable trend to basic human values, sympathy and compassion to other humans. Thus McCarthy has wonderfully made out his novel not only as a Post-Apocalyptic product but also a prophetic fabrication which speaks to the hearts and hearts of the man to apprise and urge him about the impending catastrophe if humans lack goodness and faith in God. He has made the thin thread of humanism through his two meek and helpless characters in a world of threat, horror, selfishness and cannibalism.

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