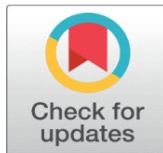


CARRYING THE FIRE: MORAL RESILIENCE AMIDST BRUTALITY AND CANNIBALISM IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S THE ROAD

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ABSTRACT

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is a profoundly bleak exploration of human survival and resilience in a post-apocalyptic world stripped of civilization and morality. The novel follows a perilous journey of a father and a son who endure a scorched landscapes devoid of life, facing starvation and constant threat of violence. Despite the gloomy nature of story the novel explores the enduring nature of human spirit and the drive to survive. A father's commitment to protect his son and the boy's innate sense of compassion and love underscore a form of resilience rooted not only in physical aspects but also in emotional and moral perseverance. The novel portrays the idea that when the human race is faced with the threat of extinction humanity finds alternatives to adapt and adopt to the changes in one's lifestyle or behaviour in order to survive. The aim of this paper is to examine the strategies and psychological shifts necessitated for human survival in a post-apocalyptic context as presented in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*. Through the lens of trauma, survival and morality this paper will make an attempt to examine how survival becomes both a physical necessity and a moral challenge in a world where traditional structures—social, familial, ethical—have collapsed.

Keywords: Post-Apocalyptic, Civilization, Survival, Trauma, Lifestyle

1. INTRODUCTION

Survival in *The Road* is brutal and unforgiving. The novel explores a world that has witnessed a catastrophic event which has led to the annihilation of countless number lives and the order in society. The term Post –apocalyptic fiction belongs to a sub-genre of specific speculative fiction where we see the world destroyed due to some natural or man-made disaster. Similarly, the plot of the post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* begins after a catastrophic event which scorches the earth leaving behind charred remains and rain ash probably caused by a meteor hit. The novel deliberates on a number of themes like trauma, faith, love, friendship, survival, disillusionment and so on. But more importantly the novel's predominant feature is the death and destruction and the race for survival.

Developing on this strain of thought, McCarthy imagines a desolate post-apocalyptic landscape which is devoid of all the things that ensure life and survival

on earth. The novel expresses the opinion that those who die are lucky because the world of survivors would never be the same. Survivors of an apocalypse are compelled to face not just a life of hardship where they are forced to look for sustenance and safe place to live and also struggle to keep their sanity -survival for life is as much a physical as well as an emotional requirement. The trauma of the event leads the father-son duo in to a psychological fix where it becomes difficult for them to trust another human being. All the rules of the societal order take a toll and people are too afraid to trust each other as survival requires violence and violence leads to more death and destruction which only dampens the spirit of the survivors.

2. BRUTALITY OF SURVIVAL: A FIGHT TO MAINTAIN SANITY AND HUMAN NATURE

In a hostile environment there are many factors that govern the behaviour of human nature because rules that belong to the civilised world no longer apply in the face of death and destruction. To maintain human sanity and the moral compass is challenging task as in a barren landscape and with the absence of society the world descends in to chaos and fear and acts of barbarism are employed for survival. McCarthy presents a harrowing world steeped in fear, where survivors risk their lives to scavenge for a morsel of food or defend themselves against violent threats. McCarthy writes, "They sat for a long time. 'I'm scared,' he said. 'Do you think we're going to die?' 'No.' 'But we might.'" (McCarthy 85). The novel serves as a profound examination of how fear, acting as both a catalyst for action and a debilitating force, influences the characters' navigation through a world stripped bare of societal structures and safety nets. (Arunakumari 2023) The father assures the boy and then states that they may die is a direct admission of fear in the face of fear one can only be guided by basic human instincts of flight or fight. Either one fears the situation and perishes in desperation or one fights the situation and dies trying to survive. In discussing the physiological and emotional manifestations of extreme fear in his article 'The Important Human Instincts' James Rowland Angel states:

In extreme fear we meet with pallor and trembling, spasm of the heart, diarrhoea, the appearance of goose-flesh, cold sweat, bristling of the hair, dryness of the mouth, choking, paralysis of the voice, or hoarse screaming, together with tendencies to flight, coupled with a feeling of weakness. These reactions are called out precisely as the instinctive reactions in animals, i. e., by the presence of appropriate stimuli. So far as consciousness is involved in them, the striking thing is the headlong fashion in which we find ourselves plunged into a vortex of intense impulsive feeling, compelling us to acts the consequences of which, in their first expressions, anyhow, are wholly unforeseen. (Angel 295)

McCarthy presents a planet which is incinerated and those that remain are the unlucky ones who are constantly looking for ways and means of survival. Amid ash covered ruins and the collapse of civilization, the novel centres on a father-son duo who journey through a lifeless and burnt-out America. McCarthy presents a state of survival crises where all basic necessities are wiped out and humans are forced to look for methods to get through life as best as one can till physical death overtakes them. The novelist puts forth the view that death is a welcome friend in times of crises but if humans exhibit resilience and the grit to survive then humanity has a chance at survival. Therefore, while expressing the despair of the survivors in the novel McCarthy notes that, "He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death." (The Road 9).

The novel details the survival journey of a father-son duo, who within the wasteland cling to life with ferocious determination and grit. The father strives to ensure that his son survives and in the hopes of a better life he travels southwards towards the sea where he believes life could be possible. The travel on road is not easy as the father is imposed with the task of finding food, water and shelter for him and his young son. McCarthy explains that the boy who was born after the apocalypse has no knowledge of the world as humans once knew, all the mental images that he has are of the world that was explained to him by his father. So material or natural entities do not make sense to him as he has no memory of having seen them. McCarthy asserts that in a post-apocalyptic land the barrenness and the bleak environment take precedence over all visual and sensory impulse. The survivors begin to forget the names of many things as they no longer bear any meaning in their post-apocalyptic life. McCarthy writes 'The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible 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.' (McCarthy 52). The complex coping strategies utilized by both fathers and sons in 'The Road' highlight the capacity of the human psyche to endure trauma and discover resilience even in the most challenging circumstances. [Arunakumari \(2023\)](#)

3. SURVIVAL CANNIBALISM: A MORAL DESCENT

McCarthy paints a picture of an infertile land, poisoned air, and roving cannibalistic gangs. These threats greatly affect the journey of the father and son who come across various types of predators [other survivors whose behaviour becomes animal like for want of food] who try to exert their authority with weapons in search of food and means. They also encounter cannibals -people who were forced to change their nature due to the unavailability of resources to sustain them. However, amidst all of this chaos the father-son duo manage to scavenge for food, avoid danger and keep moving south in search of warmth and resources for survival. While on one of their scavenging hunts the father-son come across a basement filled with naked people and a dead body lying on the mattress with its legs cut out. Outside the house there was a cauldron with broth hinting at the cannibals cooking their meal in order to attract more survivors for their food reserves. McCarthy explores this act of cannibals as a behavioural response towards the struggle for survival. McCarthy writes 'On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous.' (McCarthy 65). McCarthy depicts how the ever present threat of starvation and violence leads to instances and looming possibility of survival cannibalism. Survival cannibalism is the act of eating human flesh as a last resort in extreme situations of starvation and resource shortage, it is an innate trait of humans exerted during extreme conditions of starvation, it is associated with significant psychological trauma and it is a social taboo. Piers Paul Read author of the non-fiction book 'Alive' chronicles the lives of 16 plane crash survivors who were forced to consume the meat of the dead bodies in a fit for survival. (Read 45)

4. "CARRYING THE FIRE": MORAL RESILIENCE

McCarthy's true focus is not on survival alone but also the spirit of human endurance. McCarthy's writes - "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke." (McCarthy 2). The father tells the son that they "carry the fire"- a metaphor for hope, resilience and ethical

consciousness. The fire is not just about staying alive but finding a safe haven from where life could once again be weaved back from the remnants of chaos. The father's unwavering efforts in spite of his declining health to shield his son from cruelty and despair are not only acts of protection but also acts of moral preservation. The father's refusal to steal or descent into savagery hints on the idea of survival through ethical means and not resorting to violence or blood shed like the cannibals. Through the portrayal of the father's character McCarthy presents the idea that even in extreme scenarios of existential crisis human beings are capable of demonstrating profound resilience in the face of adversity and suffering. Moral resilience is the capacity to maintain integrity and ethical standards under pressure. The father constantly reinforces caution, silence and mistrust, as these behaviours help avoid danger. The tender, mutually nurturing relationship between the father and son in *The Road* suggests at least a faint faith in the human capacity to be moral and achieve meaningful relationships. (Cooper 228). The struggle to keep moving further with the hopes of finding something like a green piece of land untouched by the calamity remains the focal point of the novel's principle theme.

5. THE COLLAPSE OF LANGUAGE IN A DYSTOPIAN WORLD

Communication between individuals is another significant challenge in the dystopian world. McCarthy explores the strained communication between the characters- "You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget." (McCarthy 6). This dialogue from the novel reflects the mental toll of isolation and the fear of contact with others. The father forbids his son from speaking to strangers they encounter on the road, reflecting the deep mistrust that pervades their existence. The relationship between the father and son too is strained as evident from the sparse and fragmented dialogue between them. McCarthy's use of long pauses and lengthy gaps between the narratives emphasize the fact that the normal human conversation is extinct along with everything else. In the article 'Landscapes of loss: the semantics of empty spaces in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction' Martin Walter states 'While there is a group dynamic present in many post-apocalyptic narratives, not only does the absence of familiar sights and sounds increase the feeling of unease, but the new spatiality also challenges seemingly natural everyday practices, such as communication between individuals.' (Walter 139) McCarthy implies through his sparing dialogues that communication between individuals is not only strained but also the fear that the process of connecting with others may lead to uncanny situations. So in the face of survival the regular societal behaviour of greeting or inquiring after a person is no longer a necessity. In fact it is far from a necessity it can also culminate in to disaster. Lydia Cooper in her journal "Cormac McCarthy's 'The Road' as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative" states that "the vivaciousness of the boy's speech patterns and the luminous innocence of his moral commitments, in contrast to the father's consistently traumatized and exhausted thought and speech patterns, suggests that the boy is more than just the father's warrant: he is the novel's warrant as well." (Cooper 226)

6. THE BOY AS MORAL COMPASS: INNOCENCE IN A FALLEN WORLD

Additionally, McCarthy sketches the child as the moral compass of the novel. His willingness to help those on the road with them highlights the fact that irrespective of the circumstances humans can still exhibit empathy for others. In contrast to the cannibals, the boy shines as a beacon of hope and chalice of humanity.

When the thief steals their cart, the father tracks him down and strips him naked [a kind of death sentence in the cold] the boy tearfully protests with the father stating, "we would never do that" (McCarthy 256) exhibits the moral nature of the child and also exposes the tension between morality and survival. The writer draws the boy's character as a hope for the survival of humankind, whose unaltered spirit believes in the well-being of all. For instance the boy's insistence to his father to share more food with Ely draws a picture of human love and connection. As Lydia Cooper in her journal states, "The boy's growing agency, demonstrated through his capacity to articulate his own moral inclinations contrary to his father's, culminates in his rejection of the hero stories he has long sought from his father. When his father asks why he no longer wants to hear the stories, the boy indicates his insistent pragmatic interpretation of literary morals:" (Cooper 231). The boy's denial of his father's fantasy stories to boost his spirits no longer entice him because these stories do not help him in reality. The writer states, "In the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people" (225)." The writer presents the view that it is a matter of concern that the human kind must at all cost hold on to the moral values in order for the human to survive as a whole.

7. CONCLUSION: A FIRE THAT ENDURES

In *The Road* McCarthy strips the survival down to its barest elements exposing not only physical struggle but also emotional, moral and psychological. To retain one's humanity in a world devoid all love is a mammoth task. The writer presents the father and the son's journey as an ethical pilgrimage in its fight for survival and the resilient nature of the two souls who learn to bear physical pain and mental trauma. McCarthy suggests that resilience is not only about enduring pain and sorrow but also guarding one's conscience. The boy with his love and generosity becomes a symbol of hope to humanity even in the darkest corner of the world. Through the character of the boy McCarthy has portrayed that goodness can persist as long as someone is willing to uphold it. The writer hints that if all humanly connections are severed and we are left to witness a futile world. Values like kindness, sympathy, empathy etc. take a toll and these values no longer have any standing in an animal like world.

In this landscape of loss humans are forced to live according to the compelling emotions of time. *The Road* McCarthy does not offer easy answers about the limits of human morality or the inevitability of savagery. The author demonstrates that survival is not merely a biological process but a complex psychological and moral undertaking. Some do not lose their nature while some find it difficult to survive and forego their very nature and devise means of survival like the father-son duo who ransack every possible place they feel they could get some food. The boy is told that they are the good guys who carry the light within them and they must struggle to keep that fire burning. McCarthy asserts that there are some sections of people who try to see positive things in a ruined world. The father keeps telling the boy that they are the keepers of light and how it is their responsibility to make sure that light is not put off. Through the lens of behavioural psychology, one can note how fear, conditioning and reinforcements shape human conduct in extreme situations. Yet, through moral teaching and emotional bonds, the novel shows how resilience can be taught and maintained in extreme conditions. The unfortunate death of the father leads the boy to find another survival group. But McCarthy leaves the question of the boy's survival as a question of moral integrity. The writer leaves the room for interpretation while connecting the novel to broader human dilemmas. In a dark and bleak book like *'The Road'* McCarthy tries to carve out the essence of being a

human though the world might be lost, people may give way to their innate emotions but a few can truly guide the human race towards better choices. These choices may still not adhere to the rules of the world but these rules of the post-apocalyptic world though barbaric in nature try to justify the way of life.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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