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The Dialectics of Nature and Civilisation: An Ecocritical Reading of Cormac Mccarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

Apocalyptic fiction anticipates a global cataclysm due to man's incessant industrial, capitalistic, scientific, and technological endeavours. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, sees from an earth-centric approach underscoring rampant environmental degradation and ecological imbalance leading to such horrible catastrophes. Combining these two strands, this paper envisions the development of a symbiotic relationship between Nature and man, thereby attaining holistic growth. Looking through the theories of Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and especially Timothy Morton, this paper interprets the ecological concerns of the post-apocalyptic fictional world of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *The Road* recounts the journey of a father and a son and their struggle for existence through the roads of a devastated and ravaged country with a hope of a better future of mutual sustainability and continuity of life.

Keywords: post-apocalyptic fiction, ecocriticism, environmental degradation, catastrophe, symbiotic relationship, existence, and mutual sustainability.

Ecocriticism is the literary and cultural criticism that considers nature to be of paramount importance and tries to interpret a text from an environmentalist lens. Ecocriticism is an umbrella term that studies the intersection of environmental concerns with multidisciplinary studies. The Ecocritical School of thought theorists who have been influential are Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Jonathan Bate, William Rueckert, Timothy Morton, and others. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and

physical environment... ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies." (Glotfelty, 122). William Rueckert first used the term 'ecocriticism' in 1978. Although the origin of the word was in the United States, it gradually proliferated through an instrumental organisation named The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), founded in 1992 at a meeting of the US Western Literature Association.

The Ecocritics re-read texts attempting to discover Nature as silenced in texts and construe environmental representation as a relevant category of literary studies. Ecocriticism seeks to search for alternatives that would cater to the holistic and sustainable development of both man and nature. The genesis of the Ecocritical school of thought can be traced to the unprecedented advancement of science and technology, extreme capitalistic fetishism, rapid industrialisation, and rampant capitalistic modernisation that have been adversely affecting the quality of the environment. Lawrence Buell, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, writes, "ecocriticism gathers itself around a commitment to environmentally from whatever critical vantage point" (11) and that human impact on the environment has been the most recurring problem which demands attention.

The development of Ecocriticism has been like a three-fold movement. The first wave of Ecocriticism began with Buell himself in both Britain and the US. Jonathan Bate, one of the pioneers of the first wave of ecocriticism, reinterpreted William Wordsworth's texts from this point of view. Ironically, Thomas Malthus, in that era, predicted an apocalypse in his "Essay on Population" (1798), wherein he enlists down the necessities of man, thereby hinting at the upcoming despondency which would cause a scarcity of resources. Malthus rejects the conventional image of Nature as gentle, nurturing, and kind rather than ruthless and destructive if harmed. Lawrence Buell, too, concurs with this Malthusian notion of a possibility of an apocalyptic nature in *The Environmental Imagination*. The second wave was critical of this apparent glorification and mystification of the idyllic notion of Nature. However, the third wave of Ecocriticism underscores rampant environmental degradation and ecological imbalance resulting in horrible catastrophes. The third wave of critics encapsulates the tenets of the erstwhile waves, exposing the causes

and consequences of the varied climatic changes like global warming, pollution, nuclear wars, extreme weather events, etc.

Developing a symbiotic relationship between the biotic and abiotic components to attain sustainable development, preservation of flora and fauna, preventing mass extinction of species, reducing pollution rate, and limiting usage of renewable resources are some of the targets that come under the paraphernalia of Ecocriticism. The idea of sustainable development was first proposed in the Brundtland report in 1987, implying the usage of natural resources without depleting them so that future generations, too, can access them.

The third wave of Ecocriticism deals with a component called “Anthropocene”. The word “Anthropocene” has been derived from the Greek word “Anthropos”, which means “human”. Anthropocene examines human beings are responsible for the ecological imbalance and stimulator for these global catastrophes. It points out that man’s progress has rendered nature dysfunctional. In *Ecology without Nature*, Timothy Morton quashes the traditional idea of Nature. He urges that the phase of the Anthropocene must be considered a juncture of self-introspection for us to realise the amount of wreck that has been done. According to Morton, Anthropocene clips out the winged hubris of man, thereby holding them accountable for their superiority complex. “Capitalocene” is a sub-genre of Anthropocene that suggests the capitalistic ideologies of Western males as the root cause of this environmental degeneration.

Morton, in *Hyperobjects*, proposes: “The end of the world is correlated with the Anthropocene, its global warming and subsequent drastic climate change, whose precise scope remains uncertain while its reality is verified beyond question.” (5) What Morton implies is that global warming or climatic change is real, irreversible, and a transcendental object surpassing all spatiotemporal signifiers.

The scope of this paper is to examine the recent trends of Ecocriticism and the poignant ecological concerns in Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel named *The Road*.

Cormac McCarthy (1933 – living) is an American writer who has been a part of the Santa Fe Institute and is the author of eleven acclaimed novels. Among his honours are National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. McCarthy most popularly authored works are *Child of God* (1973), *Suttree* (1979), *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), *No Country for Old Men* (2005), *The Road* (2006), and *The Border Trilogy* (2013).

McCarthy's *The Road* is at the pinnacle of his authorial career. *The Road* is set in postmodern America, ravaged by an unnamed cataclysm that the author does not reveal explicitly. The experience of the readers is quite disturbing and unsettling throughout the text. What engrosses the readers is the depiction of the end of the microcosmic US or the whole world on a greater scale. Most of McCarthy's works are predominated by male camaraderie, and, in this novel, too, the readers witness a universal human bond of a father and a son plodding through the plundered setting. The duo moves towards the South to escape the cold, grey winter and to have necessities for the sustenance of life. McCarthy depicts the minimalistic availability of food, water, and other resources amidst the terrible vulnerability of life. The novel is brimming with Biblical undertones against a deranged and sickening world that is beyond redemption. The protagonist has been deliberately unnamed, which has a dual signification. Firstly, the man stands out to be a prototype of all men thus, giving a vibe of universality to the readers, and, secondly, the name of the man becomes unimportant for there is hardly anybody left in that post-apocalyptic world to distinguish amongst themselves. They survive on canned food which they scavenge daily and plod along with a shopping cart (perhaps, a marker of capitalistic consumerism and a signifier of the normal world that the man yearns for), two knapsacks, and a pistol to kill them when captured. They avoid human contact because most of the other people have resorted to cannibalism.

McCarthy's landscape is enmeshed with nihilism: devoid of colours, sounds, life, movement, and devoid of God. The setting only has impenetrable darkness and a haunting vacuity:

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. [...] The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust... (10-11)

Nature, which has perhaps suffered a nuclear holocaust, is not aesthetic or prelapsarian but a rugged wilderness which is has been ravaged by human intrusion. The wilderness is thus violent, destructive, and rebellious. Morton propounded the idea of nature being a continually existing entity, implying that nature is present both in the wilderness and also amidst human society. Thus, rather than looking towards nature with reverend awe, a man might think it to be plausible and omnipresent as a backdrop to all forms of existence. Looking from a deconstructionist perspective, it can be said that the structure of Nature has been dismantled and decentred.

The lineage of the notion of “environmental justice” can be traced back to Lawrence Buell, who conceptualised ecological well-being and “equity”. Environmental justice literature narrativises an individual’s reaction to socio-economic and ecological changes. It strikes human greed and intrusion into the ecosystems as the common denominator for every environmental problem. Environmental studies encompass ideas of connectedness, assimilation, sustainability, of equity of both the biotic and the abiotic components, thereby ensuring smooth and harmonious functioning.

The Road sketches a “barren, silent and godless” nature. However, whenever it speaks, it talks of vengeful destruction for the injustices inflicted upon it. An earthquake awakes the Man and his son. The child being tender, is terrified. Later, they witness thunder, lightning, rainfall, snowfall, and forest fires amidst the appalling winter. The forest kept burning; the trees appeared like black skeletons, subsuming and devouring whatever came within its orbit. The orange glare of the burning fire, which the man saw in achromatic surroundings, appeared to him as a possibility of returning of the Sun that had been long blotted out by the dense and darkened ash. The natural contrasting imagery of colours is a trope to signify the cold and grey existence of two tramps who are keeping the “fire inside” them to survive. At one instance, the man was awakened by a loud cracking sound. One after another, the trees had started to fall with deafening crashing sounds spreading the wildfires

“among the embers”. He awakened the boy from sleep and hurried away from that place.

The availability of food in this barren country is of utmost importance for the father. They sparingly feed themselves, starving most of the time yet walking continuously through the woods towards the South. McCarthy raises a poignant question that when human infrastructure, science, and technology have collapsed, the only resort left is Nature. However, if nature has been ransacked and ruined past retrieval, then all possibilities of existence and survival are blatantly negated. Nonetheless, in dire moments of starvation and existential crisis, the Man teaches his son to have perseverance and be resilient: “We have water. That’s the most important thing. You don’t last very long without water.”(106). The man does not have any reason to survive, but his son does. They are each other’s “world entire”.

If the people living are good, then nature, too, reciprocates with goodness, for it is in the woods that the man salvages morel mushrooms and apples to have. The waterfall allows them to rejuvenate themselves. The child is attracted to its beauty and does not want to leave that place, but the Man realises that others might get attracted to the waterfall and, thus, it is unsafe for them. Throughout the novel, the boy does not want to enter any house, for he does not trust anybody. The boy prevents the Man from entering and salvaging any building, for he feels scared. Even while slogging down the southern mountains, they could hear the sharp cracking sound of felling trees one after another. The man pacified his frightened child saying, “All the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later. But not on us.” The statement may be reflective of an optimistic father who is perhaps teaching his child the strength to hold on. It may be symbolic of the faith that man has in nature, that it does not harm the “good guys”. This echoes Morton’s idea of “deep ecology” in *The Ecological Thought* that Nature is a paradox, possessing both good and evil, positivity and negativity in a labyrinthine “mesh”:

Ecological thought imagines interconnectedness which I call the mesh. Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom? The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is

full of “itself” ...Ecological thought imagines a multitude of entangled strange strangers. (15)

This, therefore, suggests that nature is a complex of heterogeneity intertwined with each other. Every entity is a part of the other, and nature not only holds everything but is inevitably present in everything.

Occasionally, the man is tormented by anxious memories of the past. He is haunted by flashbacks of the heavenly past, trying to hold onto that plenitude of beauty, colours, sounds, fragrances, and life. The dreams that the Man sees juxtapose the past and the present creating a montage of the fragmented psyche of a post-modern individual. Both reality and the imagination have been shattered into myriad pieces transforming the present into a den of nadir. He distinguishes between good and bad dreams, suggesting good dreams in such horrific angst-ridden times means acceptance of the wreck of the apocalyptic world, whereas bad dreams in bad times signify a struggle for existence. Stopping by a dam, the child enquires about its colossal structure and purpose. The boy asks if there's any possibility of a fish in that lake, but the man denies its presence. The man feels nostalgic and talks of falcons, cranes, fishes, crows, trouts, of rowing a boat in childhood, and also playing the piano with his wife – reminiscences of an Edenic life. The boy is sceptical of the man's past, for he was born amidst this chaotic world which is falling apart and is meaningless in the wake of brutal advancement of capitalism, incessant consumerism, rampant individualism, consequent loss of community, large-scale devastations of a nuclear holocaust or a natural calamity and finally the destruction of faith in goodness, religion, reason, and God. McCarthy alludes to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the portrayal of an ambience of gloom, fear, futility, and existential crisis. The prelapsarian world that the Man yearns for is unfathomable for the boy.

However, the man woke one night when “the clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions”. (54) He could not understand what was happening. The power was already gone. The man rushed to the bathroom to preserve the water for future use. His pregnant wife stood near him in bewilderment. A few days later, their child was brought into this world. She gave birth

to the baby in their house itself using a dry cell lamp and gloves kept for dishwashing because, subsequently, the medical infrastructure had already failed. With an acute shortage of food, crumbling support systems of existence (electricity, water supply, and medical aids), destruction of houses, and depletion of forest covers – there are hardly any hopes left for survival. This instance can be equated to the Biblical Fall of man since that night, the pristine Edenic life was snatched out. They were damned to struggle, suffer, feel pain and pathos, experience hunger and thirst, and get tempted by immorality and sin.

McCarthy shares the briefest details of the reason behind such catastrophes. In such a nihilistic world, to survive without food is a provocation. The Man's wife in *The Road* committed suicide while hoping for eternal nothingness, not being able to face such a situation:

We're the walking dead in a horror film...Sooner or later they will catch us and will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it.

You would rather wait for it to happen. But I can't. I can't. (58)

After debating about the pros and cons of self-killing, she vanished into the darkness of the night leaving behind the coldness of her heart. The man thus considers the boy to be the only warrant that he has protected from all possible mishaps. The child is taken care of as if it is his divine responsibility and that he was appointed to "to take care of the child by God". The Man remarks about his son that "If he is not the word of God, then God never spoke" (3). *The Road* is interspersed with umpteen Biblical connotations that are ambiguous.

The religious ambivalence is evident when the Man kneels cursing God about his existence. He warns God to be throttled for making them suffer so much. The over-looming question that remains is whether God exists in this world or not. Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* opined that "Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead!" (120), signifying that no transcendental force is going to save a man from this absurd doom. Ely, another trespasser who is the only named character in the text, comments that death is a luxury

in these harrowing times. Ely admits being on the road always, which may imply that he had renounced human contact and bondage.

The only food left in this mutilated world is the flesh of each other. Henceforth, the survivors have transformed themselves into cannibals to exist. After five long days of starvation, the pair come across a huge house to forage for some food. The child being naïve, is certainly perturbed about entering the unknown house. He asserts to leave the house, but the Man does not listen. Upon descending to a basement room, the Man is horrified to see a group of skinny, naked, stinking, and amputated people, both men and women, who have been kept as food stock for the cannibalistic marauders. Those men and women were crying for help. Grabbing the boy, the man ran out of that place to save themselves. McCarthy depicts the moral infirmity of post-apocalyptic survivors, wherein the distinction between good and evil has been blurred out. The novel showcases the absurd behaviour of the post-modern, lost, alienated, and hopeless men who are pushed to the limits of endurance, both physical and psychological. It questions the sustainability of moral virtues in a disintegrated society alluding to the Biblical oracle that man does not only require bread to survive. The protagonist's aversion to cannibalism is starkly contrasted to the Sailor's hysteric remark in Eugene O'Neill's *The Thirst*: "We shall eat. We shall drink." (42), wherein readers witness how the drives of hunger and thirst can bring out the primitiveness in otherwise civilised man.

Eventually, they reach south, but Man's health deteriorates, and soon after, he dies. However, the man prepares the boy to survive in a ruthless world, following what they have been doing for so many years. Earlier, he preserved two cartridges to kill the boy before he died, but later, he embraced death, knowing that the boy can survive all alone. The boy sat by his father. And cried for losing him. The final episode of the novel shows the boy meeting a good family of a husband, a wife, a little boy, and a little girl. Bidding adieu, the boy joins their company, and the novel ends with a tinge of hope and a promise of continuity of goodness. The moral that McCarthy leaves open for readers to comprehend, interpret, and believe is that of mutual sustainability of all entities that belong to nature, resounding Coleridge's words in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
 All things both great and small;
 For the dear God who loveth us;
 He made and loveth all. (17)

Hence, Cormac McCarthy echoing the Ecocritical tenets, reminds the readers to be empathetic, to be humane, and preserve nature before such an apocalypse occurs.

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