

LOSS OF HUMANISTIC VALUES IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

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Abstract : The novel, *The Road* is one of the best-selling novels of Cormac McCarthy, a renowned literary writer of the contemporary American society. The novel has been published in 2007 and won Pulitzer Prize. *The Road* describes about the confusions prevailing in the society after an unnamed catastrophe. It is referred to be a road narrative as it is based on the journey undergone by the main characters of the novel. This article focuses on the difficulties faced by the protagonists of *The Road* and observes the importance given to the materialistic perspective than the humanistic values.

Keywords - difficulties, confusions, catastrophe, humanistic, values

Cormac McCarthy is considered to be one of the outstanding writers of the American Literary society. Most of his works have been well admired and praised critically. McCarthy's novel *The Road* can be listed under the category of 'road narrative'. This novel deals with the journey made by the protagonists, to seek a better future. After being suffered by a terrible catastrophe, the characters of the novel start moving towards south of their area, with the hope of getting a better future. They are not aware of the destination and what is waiting for them in the end. Due to the disaster the people have lost their normality and so they pay less heed to think about the outcome of their journey. They somehow need to escape from their sufferings and so they started their journey. The sorrowful situations of the natives can be felt through the lines, "Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color" (TR 3).

Most of their houses have been destroyed in the unnamed disaster. Many of the houses have been inhabited by dead bodies instead of living human beings. Available resources are insufficient for the survivors, which further takes away many lives. So, the people have been living with utter hopelessness. Such conditions have been expressed through the phrases like, "barren, Silent, Godless" and "wind in the bare and blackened trees" (TR 2, 14). Due to these reasons the people disbelieves their own dreams. Even after staring their journey the people are still doubtful of their safety.

The novel has a father and a son as its protagonists. Along with many others, these two start their journey. The father character depicts the complete hopelessness that he always disbelieves their existence and believes that they are moving towards death instead of happy life. Still he continues his journey without quitting it. He encourages his son to move forward motivating that at the end of their journey they may reach a place where they can lead a happy life. He wants to make the life of his son a secure one in spite of all the troubles.

Most of the characters suffer mainly due to their helpless tendencies. No one shows concern for their neighbors but wants to make their own life secured. They make use of the available resources for themselves and they are not ready to share them with others. Such severe conditions have induced the deviance to get exposed. As there are not enough resources available, many of the people try to steal what others have. The conventional ideas and values have lost their importance due to the depression prevailing in the society. Most of the survivors give importance to their lives and they are ready to forsake the conventional values to safeguard their lives.

The father character represents the past world and his dreams have also illustrated the world which is lost due to the disaster. His son also considers him to be far away from the present world. Both of them feel that their life becomes a gloomier one after the catastrophe. So they expect that their journey will bring them

something which is better than the present and start moving towards the south. Often the father becomes nostalgic, telling about the past happenings to his son. He wants to make his son familiar about the world which has been lost.

The deviance which has been represented in this novel is not a common one like stealing or robbing. The characters of this novel are happened to be murdered by the cannibals who murder their own fellow beings to satisfy their hunger. As the available resources are insufficient in the world, the people suffer due to scarcity of food. Still, somehow they have to lead their life and so they begin to expose their selfishness. Many of them go beyond control and murder their own community people and preserve them to be used later. So, the common people have started to live with the fear of being hunted by the cannibals. All through the novel, the father and his son have been trying to be cautious enough whenever they had food. Otherwise they may find somebody else with whom they may happen to share their food. Though the boy likes to help the fellow travellers, his father has no such feelings. His only intention is protecting his son and creating a safe future for him.

Despite the troubles and difficulties they face throughout the journey, the father and his son manage to continue it. Meanwhile, the father has been hit by an arrow of the hunters and he realized the fact that he cannot survive it to accompany his son. Hence he has tried to prepare his son to move alone with confidence. However, after he dies, the boy has been accompanied by a family and they assure him to accompany him till the end. From there, the boy resumes his journey with the new family and with the memories of his father.

Unlike the other novels of McCarthy, *The Road* depicts an entirely different kind of deviance. The deviant characters of this novel are also people who have outlived the disaster like the other people. These people murder the other people and eat their flesh to prolong their existence. They never show mercy on others. The deviants are people “who would eat your children in front of your eyes” (TR 192). Many other characters also involve in minor mischiefs however, they never take away the life of people to extend their survival.

In *The Road*, the people have been described as ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’. Whatever may be the complications, the ‘good guys’ follow the conventional norms of the society but the ‘bad guys’ disregard such norms and disturb the common people to make their own life happier. So, violence is portrayed as a means of endurance in this novel and the humanistic values are ignored. Humanistic bond has no meaning and value among the characters of this novel. The novel has many flesh eaters. They are not a group of people who have come from a remote country or planet. They are from the once civilized world. The perspectives and the aspirations of the people are changed and their only worry has been to overcome the conflict. The people bother about nothing else because their own existence is endangered.

It is during the primitive stages that the act of cannibalism has been prevailing. The same tendency has been expressed in *The Road* also, which makes it clear that the society is going back to its ancient period, but the characters of the novel become cannibals merely to prolong their existence. It is due to the mysterious catastrophe that the people have turned towards cannibalism. They were people who have outlived the disaster and they find it hard to get their food. Even the available sources have been used by many of them very fast and it becomes insufficient. So, a group of people decides that they can survive further only if they eat the other people. Hence it is the disaster which forces the people to become cannibals. People who are physically strong begin to chase the weak ones, to make them their prey. These cannibals are referred as ‘bad guys’ in this novel. The remaining people are listed under the category of ‘good guys’.

These ‘good guys’ are destined to face numerous problems throughout their journey, due to their submissive nature. These people are not willing to disturb or hurt others and so they have been disturbed by the ‘bad guys’. They have been trying to escape from the clutches of the cannibals. Apart from these cannibals, there are several other ‘bad guys’ who neglect to help the needy people. They are not ready to share their food or shelter with others.

The father character of the novel can also be mentioned one among the ‘bad guys’ who hesitate to help others. Again it is the situation which makes him and his son to act with selfishness. Contradictory to his actions the father has tried to teach his son the humanistic values by narrating old stories. He further tries to

create fellow feeling in his mind. He also wants to teach his son about the difference between good and bad guys. Even the boy has realized the fact that what his father teaches and what he does are not the same. He says, “Those stories are not true. (...) But in stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people” (TR 287).

The survivors of the catastrophe wish to fulfill their own needs and in this attempt, they are deprived of the humanistic values. Nobody has concern towards the other fellow beings. Even the mother of the boy has proved to be selfish by committing suicide. She understands that the present situation is not good enough for them to lead a peaceful life. Hence she decides to commit suicide and she has abandoned her son and his father to suffer in the barren world. Her detachment from her family and the world is expressed through the words, “I don’t care. I don’t care if you cry. It does not mean anything to me” (TR 57).

Involvement in educational and career development makes people concentrate only on their goal. Hence they may not find time to think or act like deviants. In the novel the catastrophe has abolished all such involvements, making the people deviants. As the lives of the people are insecure, they never think about their future. All of them are focused on securing their life in the present. Therefore they break their bond with mankind and become completely selfish. It is also to be mentioned that people in this novel do not run behind the materialistic prosperity. Money has lost its value in the society and so when the man finds “coins everywhere in ash” (TR 22) he has not paid attention to them and moves forward without taking them.

The conditions become worse as there is no law to punish any crime. The lack of law and punishment create fearlessness in the people’s mind and so crimes get increased. The criminals have become the ultimate rulers of the land. People decide that there is no hope for a better future and the society is not going to be a safe one and so they stop caring about the society and become aberrant characters. They have no work except suffering for food and shelter and so their life becomes meaningless. Many people prefer death to be a relief from the tortures of life.

The torments of life have made people doubt the existence of God. As nothing good happens to them, they start to disbelieve the presence of God and become atheists. They begin to think that believing God or religion is completely vain. The important element which bridges the people of a society is faith. The characters in *The Road* are living in a faithless society. Eventually the faithlessness has brought in lots of disappointments and confusions.

The only character who shows sympathy over the other people of this novel is the boy. It is only he who worries about the sufferings of the fellow humans. He tries to help the needy and wishes to share his food with them. He doubts the moral values of his father when the latter abandons a thief naked in the dreadful weather. The boy worries whenever he witnesses the miseries of mankind. Often he asks his father whether they remain one among the ‘good guys’ still. He has realized the fact that he has become the occupant of a new world and it is his duty to save the ruining world. Hence it is only the boy who still holds the humanistic values. Having analyzed the character of the boy, Manuel Broncano in his book, *Religion in Cormac McCarthy’s Fiction: Apocryphal Borderlands* states that, “the boy, is not the last god, but the first true human, divested of all divine fears and imbued with love for his brethren without any hope of eternal reward” (138). Except the boy there is no other human to realize the importance of human relationships. At the end of the novel there comes a new family that shows willingness to accompany the son after the death of his father. It indicates that, though the society shows no concern for the people, there is still a hope for renovation.

Therefore this article aims to bring out the loss of humanistic values among the inhabitants of a society which suffers due to an unnamed catastrophe. The condition has been well expressed through the description of the geographical condition and the life style of the people. This novel clearly explains the post-apocalyptic condition of the society. In such a situation the people are happened to lose their faith over God, religion, better future and even they fail to realize the importance of the bond with mankind resulting in total selfishness. It is proved that the society and the social conditions are more important for the human beings to lead their life peacefully with fellow feelings.

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