

Delineation of Apocalyptic Theme in Cormac McCarthy's The Road

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Abstract: in this age of technological development and ever increasing dependence upon the natural resources, the threat on environment is persistent. The environmentalists come up with the threats of upcoming disasters if the mitigation of the resources continues unchecked. Moreover, the increasing danger of war, nuclear threats and attacks also lurks in the background. Literature too has been influenced by such changes and the effects are reflected in the subject matter taken by the writers. Apocalyptic themes occupy an important place in the literary writings and a number of writers have dealt with such subject matter. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* also depicts similar themes, though the techniques used by McCarthy are slightly different. The paper thus explores the delineation of apocalyptic theme in McCarthy's novel *The Road*

Index Terms: Apocalypse, Disaster, Global warming, pollution.

Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Road* published in 2007 won much approval and recognised the author's position among the significant American writers of the contemporary times. The novel represents hopeless wandering, desolation and death, inducing in the characters a very dreadful sensation. This desolation is described by the words like "wasted country," "cauterized terrain," "desolate country" and "caustic waste" (*Road* 4, 13, 16, 200). The earth is left lifeless and there is a clear indication of this loss through the words like "late world," "paling day" and other such phrases (10). The days are dark and sunless, and "By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (32). This desolation is described by the words like "wasted country," "cauterized terrain," "desolate country" and "caustic waste" (*Road* 4, 13, 16, 200). The earth is left lifeless and there is a clear indication of this loss through the words like "late world," "paling day" and other such phrases (10). The days are dark and sunless, and "By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (32). The protagonists are undergoing a journey for the sake of improving their living conditions. A catastrophe has engulfed the entire place, making survival extremely difficult. The protagonists are also not certain of the journey that they are undertaking, having no clear idea of what lies in for them when they reach the targeted location. Their journey begins not with hope and enthusiasm but on doubt and distrust. *The Road* is thus different from the traditional road narratives as it is neither a spiritual journey nor a quest for materialistic expansion; rather it is a voyage for survival like Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.

The novel is included in the category of post apocalyptic fiction, dealing with the aftermaths of a catastrophic incident. Apocalyptic fiction is the sub genre of science fiction which deals with "imagined scientific discoveries of the future, and often deals with space travels and life on other planets" (Oxford 1367). Oxford dictionary of English defines apocalypse as "a situation causing serious damage and destruction" (58). L. Michel White also considers that apocalyptic fiction emerged as a genre of literature in early Jewish literature around third century BCE. Apocalypse has also religious connotations as most of the religions comprehend the imminence of such an occurrence like the 'Judgement day.' The Biblical revelations like, "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" also indicate the imminence of such an event (*Bible*, Rev. 21:1). The word 'apocalypse' is said to have been derived from Greek word "Apokalypsis" which means "something uncovered or revealed" (White). L. Michel White also considers that apocalyptic fiction emerged as a genre of literature in early Jewish literature around third century BCE. Apocalyptic fiction portrays the conditions and consequences of a disastrous occurrence that has caused much upheaval to the world. The event can be a natural calamity, a nuclear disaster, effect of war or any other disastrous event. This apocalypse leads to the destruction of life as well as the basic amenities available to humans, making life afterwards a grave challenge.

Post-apocalyptic fiction deals with the after-effects of such a catastrophe, and the predicament of the people in coping with the estranged environ of their locale. Such situations primarily deal with the survivors of the calamity who are faced with the issue of survival in this devastated world. In the post-apocalyptic situation, the law and order condition is also affected, inducing several aberrancies into the place. Some opportunistic people tend to take benefit from the situation and impose their authority upon the weak. Hence, there are the chances of clash among the surviving population that is divided into two opposing groups. Sometimes, the conditions of the area demand migration from the place in search of food and safety. A number of literary works deal with such themes as Andrew Keller Estes asserts, "By many accounts, the first post-apocalyptic novel is Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* which relates the exploits of a group of survivors after a plague has almost completely decimated human populations" (194). Some other works dealing with this theme are: Margret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of Flood* (2003), Doris Lessing's novel *Mara and Dann* (1999), John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* etc. What distinguishes *The Road* from such novels is the obscurity of the cause behind the cataclysm. While the earlier novels provide specific reasons leading to the downfall, *The Road* conceals such details. The novelist apprehends more focus upon the consequences than the cause of this disaster. In the modern era, a number of video games like 'The Fallout Series,' *DayZ* etc. also delineate the apocalyptic situations like those present in the novel. One of the latest game series 'DayZ' deals with the post-apocalyptic events resembling that of *The Road* (Bø).

Andrew Keller Estes in the book *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Spaces* has developed two aspects of apocalypse in American literature. The first is from Biblical perception of Apocalypse and another is holocaust of warfare. The Biblical perception of apocalypse has been dealt with in the writings of Columbus, John Cotton and Thomas Goodwin (A. Estes). These writers have induced the imminence of such a disaster as it appears in Bible. The writer compares *The Road* with the writings of the puritan writers like Jonathan Edwards and Michael Wigglesworth. Andrew K. Estes asserts, "[M]any features of McCarthy's text derive directly from the Biblical tradition of apocalypse, especially as received into popular American culture. The division of the world into 'good' and 'bad' guys

corresponds to the sorting out that takes place at Judgment Day” (193). Estes also relates the catastrophe to the atrocities of Second World War and nuclear warfare like the dropping of nuclear bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He further refers to the tragic events like Cuyahoga River fire in Cleveland, the Santa Barbara oil spill and the eutrophication (excessive growth of algae) of Lake Erie. The apocalyptic waste as depicted in the novel is related by Estes to the wasteland in the works like A. R. Ammon’s poetic work *Garbage* and Don DeLillo’s novel *Underworld*. The huge landfill of the *Underworld* as well as *Garbage* relates much to the debris of *The Road*. The man and the boy in the novel also search through the garbage and discarded waste to find something useful. This garbage has been the result of what Estes considers “techno/nuclear/ecological threats” (198).

The imminence of such a disaster as it appears in Bible. The writer compares *The Road* with the writings of the puritan writers like Jonathan Edwards and Michael Wigglesworth. Andrew K. Estes asserts, “[M]any features of McCarthy’s text derive directly from the Biblical tradition of apocalypse, especially as received into popular American culture. The division of the world into “good” and “bad” guys corresponds to the „sorting out“ that takes place at Judgment Day” (193). The inhabitants of the area, who are the survivors of the tragedy, have a bigger challenge to face. These people have to survive on whatsoever meagre resources are available, struggling at the same time with the harsher climatic conditions. The electricity connections have been damaged, phones are not working and the grocery stores are empty, “Everything Paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blackout. . . . The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color” (*Road* 3). The houses in most of the places are abandoned and smashed while a few are occupied by the rotting dead bodies. The world is left just a skeleton of what it used to be, a mere outline of a structure that has withered away.

The phrases like “Barren, silent, Godless,” “dried sludge,” “wind in the bare and blackened trees” etc are enough to lay bare the debased locale of the place (2, 11, 14). In such bleak settings, one cannot trust even one’s own dreams. The father is suspicious of his good dreams and contemplates that these are dragging him toward death. He further tells the boy that bad dreams indicate survival while the good ones are the temptations of death. His hope of survival goes on diminishing and he constantly apprehends that death is approaching them. But this does not dispirit him to give up their journey; rather he encourages the boy to go on. The pre-apocalyptic home has been lost and in search of it the survivors are exploring the unknown spaces. The following passage from the novel represents the true state of the world’s devastation:

In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all. (28)

It further appears that the annihilation itself has been caused by the mankind’s own destructive propensities and is far from being natural. The world is inhabited by a race that is prone to getting engaged in the violence and carnage. Human beings have a natural propensity of indulging in aggressive behaviour for improving their prospects as well as for self-protection. Living in a world affected by two world wars and a constant holocaust of nuclear warfare, the incurrence of an ultimate disaster does not seem unimaginable. Moreover, there are also the constant threats of calamities like tsunamis, earthquakes and intense global warming. *The Road* just seems a prophecy for the impending danger of the holocaust that is bound to destroy humanity. Maria Beville while analysing the peril of post modernity asserts, “In a secular world, where the transcendent is marginalised in favour of the material, terror is the new creed of a new hyper-real generation” (33). Thus, the novel is a sort of warning about the obliteration that the nuclear holocaust is imminent to bring upon this earth. The novel also impels upon the reader to value our possession and to make a judicious use of the resources. If the recklessness of human beings continues, it is bound to destroy the earth forever.

Conclusion: The paper has analysed the apocalyptic bearings of the novel *The Road*, impelling the reader to probe deeper into the causes of its occurrence. The immense destruction as well as the general chaos of the locale makes it necessary to have a complete knowledge of the initiation of the obliteration. Apocalyptic conditions render a complete devastation and leave the place unfit for survival. The causes of such demolition may be diverse, but from the perspective of the novel, the ecological imbalance seems to be the main cause. The mismanagement of resources including the overutilization is likely to incur a shortage of the same in near future. It intends to invoke a huge demolition which is capable of swiping away the entire humanity from the earth. The similar conditions prevail in the locale of the novel, where human population is at the verge of getting extinct. Human race is causing its own annihilation by killing and eating its own kind. There is a dire need to overcome such destructive propensities in order to uphold the survival of mankind. The final scene of the novel also propels the same message in the form of the little boy and the family who adopts him. The benevolent attitude of the boy and his new family is the only hope for survival under such pressing times.

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