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## **Towards an Ecological Ethics: A Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road***

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**Abstract:** The present paper attempts to read Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer-prize winning novel *The Road* (2006), within the general framework what Karen J. Warren calls a nontraditional ethical approach exemplified specifically by ecological feminism and an ethics of answerability (Wolf 89). The first section, "Introduction," explains and rationalizes the critical framework. My extrapolations and interventions are spelt out in this section. The Second section is an analysis of the novel. The mode of analysis consists in decoding the politics of representation as exercised through narrative devices. The third section concludes the essay with an understanding of the overall ethical impact of the novel.

**Key Words:** Ecocriticism, Ecological Ethics, Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, Postapocalyptic Novel.

### **I. Introduction**

The following is an attempt to read Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) within the broad framework what Karen J. Warren calls a nontraditional ethical approach, exemplified specifically by ecological feminism (Warren 256) and an ethics of answerability (Wolf 89).

In the first quarter of twenty-first century, most of the earth's human population, historically distributed across a complex web of power-relations, has come to live in an unhygienic, polluted and hazardous environment. But as a species, humans as such, divided among themselves along the lines of social, economic, political, racial, and gender identities, have now entered the Anthropocene, the proposed name for the geological era when human-species has become a dominant agent in the permanent transformation of the natural world. The implication of such a transition is that the collective thrust of human activities is now directly or indirectly contributing to their collective extinction in the near future. Such transition is also marked by a necessary



readjustment of existing power-relations. Humans, already fraught with internal divisions, are now categorically relegated to a disadvantageous end in the era of their own making. Such ironic circularity, where one is constantly chased by one's own carbon-footprints, calls for a re-examination of inherited assumptions. In a situation which implicates human history within the broad framework of natural history, it is imperative for the ecocritics to explore or invent various forms of narratives that can represent the implications—social, political, economic, ethical and ecological—of such a transition. Social theorist Barbara Adam in her 1998 book titled *Timescapes of Modernity*, dwells on the problems of doing so, in that the scope of the threat is either too large or too small, they are imperceptible with the naked eye, and the nature of such a threat is uncertain. In short, it is an attempt to represent the experientially absent, or the unrepresentable.

From literature, films and TV shows to online games and other cybercultural representation, the future is variously conceived in postapocalyptic terms—a deluge of Biblical scale, rapid desertification or a world-wide famine reducing civilization to a state of nature. Within the fictional space, where a ray of hope is seen in the form of space-colonization, a simultaneous note of loss, too, is heard in the form of mutating human identity. However, more often than not, such representations are enjoyed as science fantasy, and have little bearing on human behavior.

In the present paper, I subscribe to the view that along with perspectives, style and theme, techniques of characterization like personification, pathetic fallacy and positive anthropomorphism in fiction offer a buffer zone of emotional identification, an initial position conducive of a motivational momentum, before the readers can actually engage in a conversation with their received notions.

Although critic Paul Knights (2009), following the philosophy of Geoffrey Frasz, considers anthropomorphism to be a distortion of natural entities, and proposes certain psychological traits like self-understanding, self-acceptance and other-acceptance as the key qualities to be environmentally virtuous, what he ultimately suggests is an unmediated experience—intellectual as well as emotional—of the environment, which appears to be an impossible project given the fact that language itself is a representational system. Even if we assume language to be purely referential, the barrier before knowing the Other, posed by the limited scope of linguistic signs,



remains insurmountable. While suggesting literature's provocation as regards representation of the dumb creature and mute environment, Philipp Wolf writes, "Anthropomorphism is—in a sense—the only way of talking about non-human beings. Any poem is also about the speaker or reader—our relation to nature. And it is after all, a way to arouse sympathy, empathy and solidarity . . ." (112).

Insofar as the environmental virtues are concerned, I have added "ecofeminist ethics of care, kinship and appropriate reciprocity" (Warren 263), to the list provided by Paul Knights (219), which includes proper humility, respect, attentiveness, appreciation, and ecological sensitivity. Ecofeminist critics have extensively contributed to show various conceptual connections among nature, emotion, animals, young children, and women vis-à-vis the conceptually superior, interconnected categories of culture, politics, society, reason, humans, and man.

## II. *The Road*

The novel under scrutiny is classified under the genre of postapocalyptic fiction. Postapocalyptic fiction as such, narrated in realistic mode, is a rich field of study for ethical critics because it can be understood as a thought-experiment, continuously involving exercise in choice, survival being at stake in the absence of a civil society. Claire P. Curtis in her book *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract*, offers a comprehensive study of the genre drawing on social contract theories by political philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and John Rawls. In an insightful passage in the "Introduction," she explains that "Postapocalyptic fiction . . . provides a compelling basis for rethinking the conditions of and thus the response to life in the state of nature. . . . And as fiction there is room for carefully analyzing the basic motivations of human beings and the impulses that might drive us together to live . . ." (Curtis 10). In the first chapter, with regard to *The Road*, Curtis claims that McCarthy, by presenting a "state of unnature," leaves no scope for any attempt on the part of the survivors to cooperate with each other and enter into a social contract again. Her claim is valid insofar as she assumes, in keeping with Hobbes, an earth full of resources to be the primary condition of a civil society. However, her complete oversight of the novel's last section, especially as it contains a nomadic society in embryonic stage,



seems thoroughly unjustifiable. Conversely, my reading of *The Road*, suggests that through this group which adopts the unnamed, now-orphaned child, McCarthy is making a point pertaining to the ethics of empathy, memory, interdependence, and a harmonious coexistence, conspicuously set in opposition to the world-view of the man, the recently deceased father of the boy. The overall ethical thrust of the representational politics of the novel—the doomsday landscape, the plaintive tone, and empathetic characterization—is towards a single thesis question for the readers: what is a just and better way of being as humans? This is a categorically different question than the typical doomsday narratives evoke—what might have gone wrong?

The novel is set on a future earth in the throes of entropic implosion. A runaway cataclysm is signaled by the crumbling trees and heaps of mummified dead bodies. Nothing grows on soil. No creature apart from a few humans exists any longer. The landscape is chequered with deserted towns, dilapidated and rifled departmental stores, and other detritus of the twenty-first century consumerist culture. This is a post-natural, post-cultural world where ecological as well as economic collapse is complete.

The unnamed father and son, constantly on move through a gloomy, freezing atmosphere, are bound to the supposedly warm seacoast of the south. The man pushes along a shopping cart filled with scavenged stuffs and keeps reminding his son (and himself) that they are the “good guys” who are “carrying the fire.” It is only by virtue of this constant reminder that the duo is set against the “bad guys” or the cannibals frequenting the road. However, the line between good and bad is constantly negotiated in the absence of law, government, military, and other civil activities. In a world where survival is the only good one can think of, the man blindly guards against cannibalism. The uncertain nature of good and bad comes to the fore as the pair are met with different situations.

The catalyst event, recollected by the man, was preceded by “A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions”. This deliberate understatement has generated conjectures surrounding the nature of the event that had reduced the earth to its irreversibly entropic state. Dana Phillips holds, against most of the critics, that since nuclear war does not begin with “fireworks show,” the doomsday is not heralded by nuclear weapons but rather by some extraterrestrial object (177). Reading the novel as a representation of a cosmic accident and as an ecological collapse caused by



human beings, however, would produce diametrically opposite readings and consequently, different set of ethical issues.

My reading of *The Road* suggests that the ambiguity of rhetoric is a way of highlighting the irrelevance of the particularities of the cataclysmic event. There is no prescribed list of activities that could have helped one to dodge past the represented doomsday, anthropogenic or not. Neither does the novel hold forth any scope of environmental regeneration as evidenced from the narrator's voice in the last paragraph of the novel. The narrator, prior to this point, in turn assuming restricted omniscience, free indirect style, and point-of-view narration, for the first time adopts the superior position of complete omniscience. Directly addressing the readers of the post-apocalyptic era, the narrator ruminates:

Once there were brook trout in the stream in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (307).

The irrecoverable nature of the ecological collapse is confirmed in these concluding wistful lines. In such a dirge for the ecologically opulent past, the comparative understanding of the evolutionary stages of humans and other “things” in the “deep glens” can only amount to an accusation. It raises the issue of justice—while there are still a few humans left on earth, there is no brook trout left. In view of the fact that the novelist is ambiguous even about the role of human agency in the catastrophic event, this nuanced accusation seems to be irrelevant unless we read between the lines and discover the assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and activities of the characters represented in the novel. The unnamed father and the son, as they walk down the road, as they talk, engage in various activities, interact with a few characters, and as they are implicated in several situations, the novel keeps on posing ethically provocative moments for the reader.

The man, amidst a world in ruins, I shall argue, is a victim of the memories of his subjectivities, an anachronistic product of a rational, utilitarian, hierarchical and patriarchal culture. He carries



along him the cognitive traces that the consumer society had once instilled into him. For him, the past is a lost empire accessed only via memory, and the boy is his only means of re-living his authoritarian identity. For the boy, the pre-apocalyptic world-view is inherited from the narratives of his father. It is the land promised by his father, an imaginary space conceived retroactively.

The man plays the midwife as his wife goes into labour. The narrator's voice informs us that, "Her [His wife's] cries meant nothing to him. . . . He held aloft the scrawny red body so raw and naked and cut the cord with kitchen shears and wrapped his son in a towel" (64). The ironic use of free indirect discourse lets the reader into the patriarch's mind. The son is exclusively "his son." Subsequently, the scene, detailing the gang of four cannibals with the pregnant woman giving birth to a baby only to be barbecued for food, finds its counterpart in the former. Both are examples of violation of rights, but to different ends. Given the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, given the complete absence of resources, woman's womb is the only resource left for the humans to exploit. Where survival is the only good one can conceive of, fetal cannibalism seems to be the most "rational" practice. But the scene hits the reader with its naked utilitarianism, pushed too far. The scene recalls Jonathan Swift's anonymously published satire titled *A Modest Proposal* (1729), in which Swift suggests a way in order to simultaneously improve economic condition of the Irish poor, solve population problem and food crisis in general. The suggestion was that the poor Irish folks should sell their children as food for rich gentlemen and ladies. To the consternation of the reader Swift recommends, "A young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout" (7).

Similarly, as the cannibals literally survive on the produces of the womb, the boy's father, too, relies on his wife's womb to have his son. We never get to know how he used to treat his wife as the latter had already committed suicide before the narrative opens. As the man recalls her taking death as a "new lover", she rationalizes her choice in her own voice: "They will rape me. They'll rape him [the child]. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I can't. I can't" (62, 61). What she wants to escape is "rape," a logic of domination. Despite his civilized surface-activities, the man, too, subscribes to the same



logic as we can gather from his attitude towards his wife as well as from his attitude towards other women, nature and the naturalized underclass.

The novel blurs the line between nature and culture by continually pointing towards the uselessness of human projects to rebuild civilization since there is no natural resource to exploit any more. It substantiates this parasitic existence of any cultural project. The man with his cultural spillover in the postapocalyptic era, had been groomed into what he is from his very childhood. He recalls a day from his boyhood when he rowed across a lake to gather firewood with his uncle. The description of the day goes thus:

The trees themselves had long been sawed for firewood and carried away. . . . They walked along the shore while his uncle studied the treestumps, puffing at his pipe, a manila rope coiled over his shoulder. He picked one out and they turned it over, using the roots for leverage, until they got it half floating in the water (11-12).

The confident, authoritarian moves of uncle and nephew as they blissfully master the woods seem profane given there is no more tree living on earth. The sustained poeticity of language and images contributes to the final irony of the passage: "This was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon" (21). Such ironic voice assumes an omniscient and ethical tone and implicates the readers in the passage detailing the carnage of the snakes, another event from the man's early childhood. The event is from the time when the man was "the boy's age," standing "at the edge of a winter field among rough men," watching them burning hibernating clusters of snakes (231). These men practice an act sanctioned by their faith. Their faith itself is called into question as by means of this casual act of setting "a great bolus of serpents" on fire," their identity as virtuous, observant Christian is easily secured. The image of evil is thought to be evil itself. Although the passage defies anthropomorphism in Biblical terms, it also employs subtle anthropomorphism as the narrator explains their silent but spasmodic descent into death. This ambivalent nature of anthropomorphism is examined by Timothy Clark:

The issue of anthropomorphism poses the question of animal experience in all its power and ambivalence. It can be at once a mode of understanding non-human animals, a profound barrier to such understanding, a mode of appropriating of animal otherness or a term that





rebounds into the open question of what the human actually is. Finally, in the tension between these views, anthropomorphism in literary texts may enact an ethical and cognitive challenge to re-evaluate the bases of modern society. The non-human effects both a defamiliarisation of human perception, an undermining of 'speciesism' and a potentially revolutionary ethical appeal against the brutal human tyranny over the animal kingdom (198-99).

In the description of the snakes burning, silence of the complacent onlookers and that of the dying snakes are compared side by side. The passage is regarding pain of others; it is a vivid commentary on different forms of pain and raises the issue of rights of the nonhuman animals.

The man retains his dominant attitude towards animate and inanimate nature even in the narrative present when there is no nature to master, and no civilization to build. He appears to be a post-apocalyptic Quixote as the wheel of the shopping-cart he pushes is damaged, the torch of civilization that he is supposedly carrying is a diminutive gasoline lighter, and the towns he glasses like a navigator on a civilizing mission are long deserted. The map, he scrupulously follows to reach the south, claims the existence of the states, highways, and political boundaries at a time when there are no humans left to populate the land itself. It seems that he follows such spillover logic of the past in order to cling on to his authoritative identity, formed during old times. The same assertiveness is extended on the naturalized underprivileged. As the father-son group interacts with different characters, the father reveals his unsympathetic, appropriative, and cruel aspects. When they come across the man struck by lightning, "burntlooking as the country," the man silently passes him without exchanging a single word. When the boy asks his father whether they can help him, the answer he gives is "no" (62). Again, as the pair finally reaches the sea-coast, their cart is stolen by a thief, an outcaste from his commune. The man catches him and makes him strip naked at gunpoint. He assures that the thief die in cold. The thunderstruck man as well as the thief is described in terms that substantiate them as "natural" as opposed to the "cultural" status of the man. The former is viewed by the man as an uncanny element appearing from the middle of nowhere. The thief is seen as "[s]crawny, sullen, bearded, filthy," and is already an outcaste whose right-hand fingers have been cut away giving his hands an appearance of "fleshy spatula" (311). Such hand is more like a chopped branch of tree than a wieldy limb. Such systemic naturalization of the marginal



can be understood as an Enlightenment legacy, justifying the mechanisms of the dominant class/caste/race/species/sex.

We can compare the son's attitudes with those of the man. While memory is a space of loss for the man, the boy, having no memory of the past, retroactively conceives the norms of the pre-apocalyptic world. The past for the boy is mediated via his father's language and narratives of rationalism. While most of the critics stress the father-son love in *The Road*, it seems that the boy is rather a self-imposed reason for the man ensuring his own survival, in the widest sense of the term. The child gives the man, an epitome of Western rationalism, a much desired "telos," a direction to which he can comfortably move. The narrator's voice informs us: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (5). The mother of the boy just before she commits suicide confirms this as she says, "[t]he one thing I can tell you is that you won't survive for yourself. . . . A person who has no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love" (93). Such a reading would subvert the surface where the son "needs" his father who appears to be the former's protector. Instead, it reveals that it is the father who requires the son to exist, the condition for the father's existence being an amalgam of old-order identities—of an authoritative protector/patriarch/educator.

In each of the encounter with other characters, the son with an intention of helping them out pleads with the man with a discourse of care, love, kinship, empathy, and kindness. Paradoxically, the boy learns those things from his father. It is not to confirm that the man embodies those qualities or practice any one of them. The "stories" the man has told him enshrines these values. This contradiction reflects the inherent contradiction within humanist dualist discourse in general which at ideological level holds forth the lofty values of empathy, reason, justice, and well-being of others. But at the same time, the ethically informed subject is one generic "human beings," who practically is a tiny intersection of the privileged in the structures of hierarchy. In practice, the othering of women, children, animals, and nature reduces them as non-humans, justifying their subordination. The son, alive to the beauty of the stories of his father, embodying the ethics of justice, care, love and empathy, adopts them as his own. However, he subsequently becomes aware



that in actuality, his father never exercises any of those values.

Towards the end of the novel, a few days before the man dies from the infection in his leg, one of the father-son conversation goes thus:

Do you want me to tell you a story?

No.

Why not?

The boy looked at him and looked away.

Why not?

Those stories are not true.

They don't have to be true. They're stories.

Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people. (286-287)

Human beings help each other not only to secure a mutual advantage but it is also a way of being human. The act of helping others, humans or not, is a gesture of honour. A respect due to "existence" as well as to "being." Such realization of justice is followed by three-fold act of self-understanding, self-acceptance and other-acceptance and the act of justice is accomplished by empathy. Although there is certainly an element of anthropomorphism involved in empathy, it needs not always involve petty sentimentalities. There is no denying the fact, that the father experiences genuine emotional attachment with his son. But such personal attachment guided by selfish motives, has robbed others of their rights. In his struggle for assuring a positional identification with an authoritative prototype, the man also exercises masochistic self-mutilation. He remained alien to his son's actual needs. While drawing his last breath he realizes, "[i]n some other world the child would already have begun to vacate him from his life" (292). Conversely, the boy's emotions have always been selfless and all-embracing. Thus, the unreliable nature of emotions does not always guarantee an ethical act as substantiated by Simon Cooke in his essay titled "Unprofitable Excursions: On the Ethics of Empathy in Modernist Discourses on Art and Literature". Empathy as a cognitive act involves a just choice. Formulated in this manner, empathy is an act of comprehension, with a preconceived notion of justice. An act can be conceived as ethical if that is simultaneously empathetic and just. Any emotion that promotes such act is worthy



to embrace.

The notion of justice, as instilled into the boy from being around his father, surfaces as he comes across the nomadic group after his father's death. The boy's standard of "goodness" is set against those of the male leader of the community as the boy asks him a series of questions:

How do I know you're one of the good guys?

You dont. You'll have to take a shot.

Are you carrying the fire?

Am I what?

Carrying the fire?

...

Do you have any kids?

We do.

Do you have a little boy?

We have a little boy and we have a little girl.

He's about your age. Maybe a little older.

And you didnt eat them.

No.

You don't eat people.

No. We dont eat people.

And I can go with you?

Yes. You can.

Okay then.

Okay (303-304).

The values like trust and gender equality are added to rather vague ones like being "good guys", "carrying the fire" and anti-cannibalism. For the boy, the essential criteria of "goodness" are answered in even fuller terms as he is adopted by the group. The woman of the group, a maternal figure, "put her arms around him and held him," and said, "the breath of God . . . passes from man to man through all of time" (306). Such spirits of care and kinship are an alternative model of social



contract based on rank and exploitative relations. Rather, it is a group which believes in mutuality as the boy is allowed to carry his father's gun and pray to his father's memory as opposed to God to whom the woman offers her prayer.

### III. Conclusion

The conclusion of the paper should concur with that of the novel. Not for the sake of linearity but for its significance—in terms of novelistic techniques and content. As I have already mentioned, it amounts to the narrator's subtle incrimination of our species for the injustice perpetrated by us to our fellow species. The paragraph reads thus:

Once there were brook trout in the stream in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (307).

Although, the lines confirm the irreversibility of the ecological collapse, and that we may never set the wrongs right again, they also promote a vision of mutual existence as the relatively detached narrator assumes a superior ethical position and in a tone highly charged with pathos, relates the narrative past to the readers ("you") in the narrative present (307). The lines also confirm a frustrated vision of justice—a vision which derives from an empathetic acceptance of the Other and a subsequent wish to give every object their due in the scheme of things in which humans hold but a small place. The vision is frustrated because humans, with their discourse of progress, and an all-consuming greed were never satisfied with their due. They failed to comprehend their own diminutive status with respect to the great web of life. Instead, they hold on to an imaginary identity. This fictional identity is the prison-house that the unnamed man had made for himself. With self-understanding, self-acceptance and other-acceptance, the nomadic group marks a point of redemption for the whole humanity. Viewed from this perspective, the road in the novel stands for humanity's penitential journey towards knowing what it is like to be a human.



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