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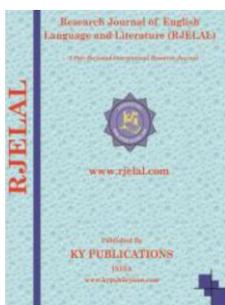
## ANALYSIS AND STUDY OF CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD* AS A DYSTOPIA

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### ABSTRACT

The term dystopia("bad place") is applied to works of fiction that represent a very unpleasant world in which ominous tendencies of the present social, political, and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination. Dystopia is an imagined state or society where there is great suffering or injustice, typically one that is totalitarian or post- apocalyptic. Dystopian fiction is a genre of fiction that explores the social and political structures in 'a dark nightmarish world'. It characterizes a society plagued with suffering, squalor, poverty or oppression.

The novel *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy revolves around a boy and his father seeking to survive in a ruined, post-apocalyptic world after cataclysm. In the novel, the world is divided into two opposing groups who are struggling for survival in the midst of distrustful environment. The present paper seeks to explore and analyse the novel and its despairing and nihilistic tone and mood as a post modern dystopian text wherein the characters are struggling for survival in a nightmarish and dark world where poverty, violence, squalor are recurrent and common feature. Thus, the paper focuses on analysis of the novel *The Road* as a dystopia.

**Keywords:** Dystopia, suffering, postmodern, ashen, darkness.

### Introduction

Dark, gloomy, nihilistic, despairing are some words that are used to describe a dystopia. Dystopia is translated as "bad place" and all these words set up the tone that suggests a bad place where the world is unpleasant and ominous. According to *Merriam- Webster Dictionary*, Dystopia is "an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives". Dystopia presents a harrowing tale wherein the characters are struggling to escape some sort of evil that may be political control, totalitarian regime; apocalypse; scientific or technological disaster; oppression, etc. Dystopian literature has become an ever-increasingly popular genre in the recent times. It is quite ironic that human civilization is experiencing

massive technological advancement and all kinds of developments in diverse fields yet dystopia is one of the favourite genres of the postmodern world. In the Introduction to their book, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (2003), Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan write, "By 1984, a more clearly dystopian turn began to emerge within the popular imagination of Anglo-American societies" (3). The reason for this shift towards dystopian genre may be the two World Wars and the large-scale violence and bloodshed; totalitarian regimes and political control; or advancement of science and its repercussions. As Louisa Mackay Demerjian writes in her book, *The Age of Dystopia: our Genre, our Fears and our Future* (2016):

Dystopian works reflect society's worries. What do we have to worry about? Income inequality, the financial crisis, power in the hands of a few- few anonymous, wealthy, powerful elite- which brings to mind the elite group of Party insiders in 1984. Science and technology are impacting our lives and changing who we are as people when few of us understand how these things- genetic engineering, software engineering- are done. Climate change- we don't know what the seasons will be like over time and we don't know how many cities are going to be underwater or, on the other end of the spectrum, completely dried out. We don't know how our changing environment will impact food production but we know there are pollinators at risk (1).

Therefore, it is the chaotic state of human beings in the present scenario with respect to our economy, environment, polity, morality, ethos, culture that has somehow brought about the shift from utopia to dystopia. The dystopian writers just want to warn us of the consequences of the route that human generation is presently treading on. A similar opinion resonates in the book *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (2003), in which Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan write, "By the end of the 1980s-.....several sf writers confronted the decade's simultaneous silencing and cooptation of Utopia by turning to dystopian strategies as a way to come to terms with the changing social reality. Works by Octavia E. Butler, Cadigan, Charnas, Robinson, Piercy, and Le Guin refunctioned dystopia as a critical narrative form that worked against the grain of the grim economic, political, and cultural climate" (3).

### Discussion

*The Road* written by Cormac McCarthy in 2005 is a postmodern text that incorporates dystopian elements in its framework. It presents a father and his son who are constantly struggling to survive in a decayed world. They know that they are the "good guys" and they are going to the South and while they are on the road they have to escape the

"bad guys". The ambiguity of the novel is what makes it essentially a postmodern text. As Jakub Ferencik writes in his article entitled, 'A Postmodern Vocabulary in Literature', "The postmodern on the other hand says that they value the 'undecidable'. They prefer not to make a decision and rather propagate ambiguity and mystery". The novel is full of mystery and ambiguity. To begin with, the reader does not know the name of the place or of any characters or what sort of cataclysm landed the protagonist into such dark world. All that the reader knows is that there is an apocalypse but it is never made clear as to what exactly that apocalypse was and how the world in which the main characters are placed is so dark, nightmarish and ashen throughout the novel. As reader, one is completely surrounded by mystery through each word of the text. However, the atmosphere, tone, setting and mood of the novel is, typically, dystopian. Bleakness and darkness is reflected in almost every other sentence of the text. In the very first page of the novel, McCarthy writes, "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before"(1). All that is known is that they have survived some sort of apocalypse and they are moving towards south in search of a better world but they are not even certain that their destination would be any better than their present nightmarish journey. Words like, "Barren, silent, godless" (2) are used to describe the place where the novel is set.

Both the main characters are leading wretched lives. Their lives have no purpose. They always have to escape "the bad guys". They are just moving on the road with their knapsacks and tarps. They are struggling to survive in a post apocalyptic world, wherein they have limited food supplies, no place to live, no basic amenities and they undergo a lot of horrible things like cannibalism, violence, starvation. As Erika Gottlieb writes in her book, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial*: "The experience of the trial is imbued with the nightmare atmosphere typical of dystopia" (10). She further writes, "In this study, I suggest that the protagonist's trial as an emblem of injustice is a thematically and symbolically central device of dystopian fiction" (10).The world which they inhabit is dystopian in this sense. McCarthy writes, "They

were all day on the long black road, stopping in the afternoon to eat sparingly" (62). The following dialogues between the father and the son accentuate the fact that they are in a post-apocalyptic world:

Did you have any friends?

Yes. I did.

Lots of them?

Yes.

Do you remember them?

Yes. I remember them.

What happened to them?

They died.

All of them?

Yes. All of them.

Do you miss them?

Yes. I do.

Where are we going?

We're going south.

Okay (61-62).

The protagonist has lost everything, his wife, his family, his house, his friends and even his individual identity in the apocalypse. All he has is his son. While discussing the characteristics of dystopia, Erika Gottlieb writes in her book, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial*, "The protagonist's experience and fate is tragic in the sense that it deals with irrevocable loss on the personal level: he or she loses his position, his beloved, his freedom, and.....a loss possibly even worse than the loss of life: the loss of his private, individual identity" (13).

Their limited supplies of food end and they starve for many days, though with great difficulty. They go to ruined and deserted houses to look for some leftover food. They would rarely succeed in finding food. The post-apocalyptic tone is strengthened as McCarthy writes: "The country was stripped and plundered years ago and they found nothing in the houses and buildings by the roadside"

(193). On one such occasion, when they are looking for food in a deserted house, they encounter mutilated men and women screaming for help. McCarthy describes this and writes, "Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt..... Then one by one they blinked in the pitiful light. Help us, they whispered. Please help us" (116). This emphasizes the dehumanized and anguished existence which is one of the central characteristic of a dystopia. It is this portrayal of violence, suffering of the characters, the gloomy atmosphere and such heinousness and wretchedness make the text a dystopian narrative.

The setting of the novel, more specifically, the landscape and its description is very vivid and terrible and ominous things are described by McCarthy. All these descriptions heighten the effect of dystopia. For instance, "He sat in the leaves at the top of the hill and looked into the blackness. Nothing to see. No wind" (200).

While on the road, both the main characters come across the remains of an orchard. McCarthy describes a field that has once been an orchard in most horrific manner. He writes,

The trees in their ordered rows gnarled and black and the fallen limbs thick on the ground. He stopped and looked across the fields. Wind in the east. The soft ash moving in furrows. Stopping. Moving again. He'd seen it all before. Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away. The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes. They wore gold rings in their leather ears and in the wind their sparse and ratty hair twisted about on their skulls (94-95).

On their journey, the man and the boy meet an old man who is in very deplorable condition and is starving. The old man does not utter a word but he eats what they offer him. The old man is described

as: "The old man lowered his hand from his head. He blinked. Grayblue eyes half buried in the thin and sooty creases of his skin" (174). While the boy feeds the old man, McCarthy compares the old man to a vulture: "He looked like someone trying to feed a vulture broken in the road" (174).

All these incidents symbolize the suffering, oppression and squalor that are recurrent themes of any dystopian text. Christopher S. Ferns writes in his book, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*, "dystopian fiction portrays a society whose undesirability is far more clearly self-evident than the desirability of its utopian counterpart, while at the same time it presents a protagonist whose actively critical attitude towards it is far easier to endorse" (111). It is in this way that *The Road* can be looked upon as a dystopian novel. Since, the setting of the novel is an ominous and distrustful environment, the protagonist is wary of other people around and the landscape, themes, and other things are harrowing, dark, despairing and ashen, therefore, the novel can be broadly categorized as dystopian fiction. What is all the more pertinent is the fact that the apocalypse or the catastrophe is nowhere explicitly described by McCarthy. It is only hinted here and there that there was some disaster which has ruined the world in which the novel is set. McCarthy keeps this open-ended or leaves it up to the reader to ponder as to what might have happened. He, thus, fulfils the primary aim of dystopia which is to warn the societies against the potential threats to humanity. As Christopher S. Ferns writes in his book, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*, "Dystopia, in effect, satirizes both society as it exists, and the utopian aspiration to transform it" (109). McCarthy succeeds in doing so and makes the warning all the more impactful by keeping it subtle and mysterious throughout the novel. The novel, thus, voices the discontents of the postmodern world. To sum up, it can be said that *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy is a post modern dystopian text, postmodern because of the ambiguity and how it celebrates multiplicity and differences and dystopian in its tone and portrayal of characters and in its warning of what may happen if human beings lose civilization and cultural ethos.

## Conclusion

Thus, the paper analyses the dystopian elements in the novel *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. It highlights the tone, atmosphere and setting of the novel and how they contribute to the overall dystopian or ominous effect of the novel. The paper studies how the novel not just voices the postmodern concerns of the age but also warns the readers against some impending future catastrophe, if humanity does not check its reckless actions in the name of technological advancement and its unbridled thirst for power

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