



SEARCHING FOR MEANING BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH: A STUDY OF CORMAC MCCARTHY'S THE ROAD

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Abstract: Cormac McCarthy's "The Road" deals with journey of two unnamed characters in the devastated land due to the attack of unspecified catastrophe. In search of the meaning between life and death, the man chooses life unlike his wife who committed suicide fearing being raped or killed by cannibals. Father determined to continue his journey of life for the sake of his son. He instills hope in the mind of his son and asks him to continue his life even after his death. Father's efforts to find out the meaning in his life by making his son carry the 'fire' and live as a good guy.

Keywords: Purpose, devastation, quest, hope, optimistic

INTRODUCTION

What is the meaning of our life? Do our lives have any purpose? If anyone knows the meaning of these questions, really they are not ordinary people; but celestial beings. Shakespeare in Macbeth says 'Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing'. Writers like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet and Eugene Ionesco deal with absurd nature of human life. They believe human beings are struggling vainly to find out the purpose of life. Human life in this world is highly uncertain and we cannot have control over our destinies. Our lives are predestined and death is ultimate. No one knows about the ways of God. But man is born to think and act. He cannot keep quiet putting the blame on fate. Man has the constant quest to find out the purpose of his life. My research paper is going to discuss how the two unnamed characters- the father and his son in McCarthy's "*The Road*" undergoes a difficult journey in the devastated land due to unspecified catastrophe amidst a hostile environment with the will to survive.

McCarthy was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1933 and grew up in Knoxville as his family moved there after few years. His father, a lawyer, worked for the Tennessee Valley authority. His was a catholic family and McCarthy was an altar boy. McCarthy married thrice and had two sons. The novel 'The Road'

was dedicated to his second son John Francis. Once McCarthy was staying with John Francis in the El Paso hotel. While John was sleeping, McCarthy was standing near the window and gazing at the city and imagined what would happen to the future generation if the city had been attacked by a sudden catastrophe. This is seed from which the novel 'The Road' emerged. McCarthy's fear is similar to any father of older generation fearing about the life of future generation and how the younger generation is going to reap what the previous generation planted in this planet. We, the so called "civilized" pollute the earth and exploit the natural resources for monetary gain. The natural disasters are the ways of earth's showing its anger towards the ingratitude human beings. Man's self-centered pattern of life, consumerism, greediness and unethical uses of natural resources would have a serious impact on our lives.

The novel "The Road describes the journey of a father and his son through deserted land with no living creatures except one or two human being and a few cannibals. Their journey does not have any destination. They travel towards south to escape from the hostile whether. Since the characters are not given any name, they represent any man or men who try to survive amidst all odds. The kind of catastrophe which struck the earth is not mentioned. But there is no sign of life. Everything is covered with ash. The land is barren. The weather is horrible.

The country was looted, ransacked, ravaged. Rifled of every crumb. The nights were blinding cold and casket black and the long reach of the morning had a terrible silence to it. Like a dawn before battle. (137)

The father and his son experience extreme cold. They are hungry. They almost starve to death. They carried knapsacks which contains certain basic things. They also carry a cart with few provisions and eatables. They are under constant threat that they may be attacked by some stranger or robbed by them. She didn't want to survive when everyone is dead. She said, " We're not survivor. We're the walking dead in a horror film" (57). They are on the run in search of food, shelter and safety. As a result the father questions the very existence of God.

"Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart! Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God! (10)

Because of their will power the father and his son move on. The man's wife choses death easily fearing either she may be rapped or killed. "That the boy was all that stood between him and death" (29). There is no wind. Dead silence. Their day pass in an in secured way. When a man is about to harm the boy, the father killed him. He said, "My job is to take careof you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (80) every minute is lived in fear and nightmare. The weather is hostile and what they come across is the whump of the falling trees and the low boom of the loads of snow exploding on the ground set the woods to shuddering (102). They have to live without food many days. It is the will power and positive words of the father that help them survive. It is apt to quote conversation between the father and the son here.

Why do you think we're going to die?

We don't have anything to eat.

We'll find something.

okay.

How long do you think people can go without food?

I don't know.

But how long do you think?

May be a few days.

And then what? You fall over dead?

.....

Well you don't. It takes a long time. We have water. That's the most important thing.

You don't last very long without water.

.....

But you think I might lie to you about dying.

Yes.

okay. I might. But we're not dying. (106-107)

The man follows certain ethics. He often speaks promising words to his terrified son. He whispered, "I won't ever leave you". Do you understand?" (120). When he couldn't keep up his words, there will be a prompt from his son to keep up his promises. Father instils good values in his son and stresses the importance of being a good guy. The following conversation shows that the man is an ideal father.

We wouldn't ever eat anybody, would we?

No. Of course not.

Even if we were starving!

We're starving now.

.....

No. No matter what

No. No matter what

Because we're good guys.

Yes

And we're carrying the fire. (136)

Since they believe they are good guys and carry the 'fire' they don't want to harm anyone or anything unless it is for the self-defence. Though their journey is filled with ordeals, they do not lose the human values. Even in the journey of life or death, their effort to follow certain basic ethics is really appreciable. Aylin in his article "Ethics of Being in Cormac McCarthy's The Road" observes:

Whereas there seems to be some constant promises of the definition of being good, the father improvises the rest depending on the occasion, and the expectations of the boy.

That they will not kill unless in self-defence, steal from others, eat other people or dogs are the ground rules they concur in. These rules convey respect to the unalienable right of the other to live, refuse to instrumentalise the other, or his property, for the needs of the self, and reject an anthropocentric view point that entitles humans to make use of nature, in this case animals, for survival. (Aylin 76)

“The Road” was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, 2007 and also bagged the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction in 2006. This book was adapted into a film in 2009, directed by John Hill Coat.

The Road is a post-apocalyptic novel narrating the difficult journey of the father and his son through the devastated American landscape after the unspecified cataclysmic event. They move towards south hoping to find friendly environment. It is a journey on foot for several months. They witness the death of all plants and animals. Nothing is left: no society and no hopes. No food and no shelter. Though they see the extinction of all lives in the planet, they follow certain principles and ethics even at the time of crisis. Their journey has no purpose as there is no destination for the journey. Meaninglessness and nothingness are their experience. Albert Camus in his “he Myth of Sisyphus” says, “The greatness of man lies in his decision to be stronger than his condition” (Camus). The father was always hopeful and optimistic. He often whispered, “Everything’s okay”.

When they go out of supply, they found out a mansion. They discovered a locked room that contained naked men and women waiting to be eaten by cannibals. They flee from there and “they lay in the woods like fugitives” (198). Then they found out a bunker filled with food, clothes, shoes etc., They stayed there for few days, regained their strength and filled their cart with enough supplies. On their way they shared their food and eatables with an old man. The old man says “Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave” (180). Despite their suffering, they help the old man and keep alive the humanity.

They reached the sea and came across a boat drifted from the shore. The man asked his son to have a watch with the gun and he swam to the boat and brought the supply including a flare gun to the shore. Then the boy fell ill and the father spent sleepless night to guard his son. The man said, “Every day is a lie. But you are dying. That is not a lie”. (254). When they continue their journey, the father was shot at his foot by an arrow by a stranger. The father shot that man dead and pursued the journey. Blood oozed out from his foot and his cough aggravated. Father’s condition worsens and he asked his son to continue his journey without him. He told the boy that he could talk to him after he had gone.

You need to go on, he said.You need to keep going. You don’t know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You’ll be lucky again. Just go. It’s all right. (297)

The boy stays with the dead body of his father for three days. Then he was approached by a man carrying a short gun. That man convinces the boy that he is one of the good guys and he has a son and a daughter. The boy goes with that man’s family.

In Hinduism, Kali Yuga is one of the fourth Yuga and during that period the world would experience famine and people chase only materialistic things. Even people start eating one another. There will be fighting and arguments and there will not be any ethics. At the peak of Kali Yuga entire world will be devastated and all creatures would vanish from the planet and there would be only destruction everywhere. In Kali Yuga,

The world experiences famine and people resort to eating whatever they can, including leaves and roots. The suffering from famine will be amplified by fighting and distrust amongst people. People will no longer care for their elderly family members and will abandon all family ties and friends in the pursuit of money.

CONCLUSION

In *The Road* the author did not specify the nature of cataclysm. In the barren earth the man makes the choice to survive unlike his wife and continues the journey of life in the hostile environment and angry nature with the only hope that his son would survive in the future world as a good guy. Though death would be an easy choice the father determined to undergo any ordeals to protect his son as said in the Bhagavad Gita that action is better than inaction (Bhagavad Gita 3.8). The title “The Road” metaphorically means the journey of life. The man and his son always have an eye on the road. This novel is an example of indomitable will of the human beings. If man has the will power, it is possible for him to survive in the barren earth. It is the responsibility of man to protect nature and all the creatures in nature to live a peaceful life in this planet. It is essential to share the resources with every creature and to build a strong base of ethical values in the future generation.

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