

“DEATH IS NOT A LOVER”: AN ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE “EXTINCTION” OF WOMEN IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

Sani Chartudomdej

Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Corresponding author:
Sani Chartudomdej
sani.c@chula.ac.th

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The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy has been widely praised for raising concerns about ecological destruction and inciting conversations surrounding human extinction. Focusing on the aspect of gender, this research article essentially argues that the author uses post-apocalyptic elements together with the anti-heroic mode in an attempt to express a post-feminist point of view. The two components are, supposedly, meant to work together not only to challenge traditional gender ideologies but also to suggest that the book has transcended the essentialism and binary thinking of conventional feminism when it comes to gender roles and relations. However, when viewed from an ecofeminist perspective, a correlation between the author's biased treatment of women and nature is revealed. While McCarthy expands the roles of his male characters, he under-represents, marginalizes and victimizes both women and nature in *The Road*. By advocating and perpetuating male domination of women and nature, the author negates women's experiences and connections to the earth while sabotaging their contributions and abilities in protecting and preserving it. The “extinction” of women in the book essentially overlooks their role and significance in shaping and crafting a sustainable ecological narrative. This ends up undermining the novel's reputation and status as a celebrated part of the environmental writing canon as it fails to resonate with a wider audience.

Keywords: *The Road*; Cormac McCarthy; anti-heroism; post-apocalyptic; ecofeminism; gender

1. INTRODUCTION

Most scholarship on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* centers on its status as eco-fiction, emphasizing its portrayal of a uniquely grim post-apocalyptic setting, and praising how the novel serves as a cautionary tale of what might happen if humans do not take good care of the environment. Among this is the article “The End of the Road: Pastoralism and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*,” in which critic Tim Edwards (2008) contends that, because of its grim landscape comparable to that of Eliot's waste land, “*The Road* is a prophetic hieroglyphic of horror, an American jeremiad more terrifying than even the Puritan imagination could conjure” (p. 60). Edwards posits that this horrific story needs to be told to a post-9/11 audience so that they are reminded that once a certain ecological line had been crossed, things “could not be put back. Not be made right again” (McCarthy, 2006: 287 as cited in Edwards 2008: 60). Critic Adeline Johns-

Putra (2016) takes this further and argues that the environmental devastation, "the sparse landscape of *The Road*," incites the readers' anxiety over the problem of climate change. It raises their "doubt and unease over humanity's inhumanity to the planet and its future" while reminding them that appropriately caring for the environment requires a lot more work than what the protagonist does in the novel—to simply take care of one's own children. It entails a more compassionate approach, "a reaching out to others—to other children and, indeed, other humans" (p. 535).

A few studies on the novel approach it from the perspective of gender, with a focus on the issues of patriarchy and masculinity. One of them is Naomi Morgenstern's (2014) article entitled "Postapocalyptic Responsibility: Patriarchy at the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*", in which she explores the role of patriarchy in a post-apocalyptic world where a masculine subject is forced to contemplate his death at the end of the world. Another work that investigates a similar subject but from a feminist perspective is Berit Åström's (2018) "Post-Feminist Fatherhood and the Marginalization of the Mother in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*", in which the critic argues that, in the novel, the author utilizes "post-feminist fatherhood to valorize the father and vilify the mother, thus participating in a continuing cultural trend of privileging fathers over mothers" (p. 112). Åström (2018) further notes that a number of critics have "unquestioningly" embraced "the post-feminist marginalization of the mother" and participated in a "critical co-writing" move, where they side with the author instead of observing "a critical distance," and "represent the author's ideas without problematizing them" (p. 112). In this work Åström (2018) insightfully points out that the reason why there are not many feminist analyses of Cormac McCarthy's works, especially *The Road*, is because such criticisms that center upon the author's "potential narrative misogyny" are likely to be dismissed as "misguided," "irrelevant" (p. 112), and "oversimplifications" as they fail to consider the "ingenuity, subtlety or genius of the text" (Gamblin, 2011 as cited in Åström, 2018: 113).

In this research article, however, both ecocritical and gender perspectives are integrated into the form of ecofeminism, which introduces a feminist perspective to criticisms of environmental issues in literature, drawing comparisons between the treatment of women and non-human nature in a text. With regard to this association, critic Karen J. Warren (2000) insightfully notes that "there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature" (p. 1). Careful examination of the novel in this light reveals that there is a striking parallel between the novel's "unjustified" treatments of women and nature: both of them are marginalized and placed in the background in a work that adopts an androcentric and human-centric overtone. In ultimately focusing solely on the survival of men as perpetrators of culture and human civilization, the novel essentially places them at a higher status and attributes them with higher values than women and nature. In doing so, it can be argued that the novel plays a part in driving the same mechanism that perpetuates the problem of inequality—the core cause of many environmental issues in the first place. As a critical approach, ecofeminism is introduced in this article not only to bridge the gap in the scholarship on *The Road* without endorsing the practice of critical cowriting but also to question and challenge the novel's well established status and fame as an esteemed part of the ecological writing canon.

2. THE ANTIHERO IN A POST-APOCALYPTIC WORLD

The Road tells the story of an unnamed father and son journeying through the bare and bleak landscapes of post-apocalyptic America years after the event that marked the end of the world as we know it has already taken place. The world at this point is a "barren, silent, and godless" place, where "nights [were] dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before" (McCarthy, 2006: 3-4). The fact that all the characters are left in this arid place, which is almost entirely void of food, renders their main action to be a struggle for survival. The two main characters are constantly searching for food: "Mostly he worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food" (p. 17). This essentially takes us back to the world before civilization and we start to see a reset of many indicators of society as we know it including moral, social, and ethical standards. At this point, some of the people have resorted to cannibalism, which leads to one of the major conflicts in the story: morality. The man and his son are constantly asking each other whether they are still "the good guys" to keep reminding themselves of some moral codes from the old world. To be "the good guys" means that the man and the boy have made a pact that they will not turn into cannibals no matter how desperate they become. They also symbolically state that they are "carrying the Fire," which means that they will keep on living despite adversity, suggesting the mission of continuing the human race.

The use of a post-apocalyptic landscape offers McCarthy the ultimate opportunity to challenge traditional ideologies. Such is a space where one can "contemplate the uncontentable" (Johns-Putra, 2016: 522), and where traditional values—especially the ones concerning moral and gender standards—are called into question and put to the test. Moreover, in order to fit with such a setting, McCarthy utilizes the anti-heroic

mode to show what adjustments his central character needs to make in order to thrive in a post-apocalyptic environment.

On this note, we can argue that the novel's protagonist, the man, is not a traditional hero per se. He exhibits no sense of nobility, idealism, or altruism—the three characteristics typically used to define a hero. Unlike those of a typical hero, his actions are driven purely by the need for the survival of himself and his beloved son, rather than the desire to improve the fate of the society in which he lives. Survival is his priority and when it comes to his son's safety, he does not hesitate to kill, to harm, or to avenge. For example, early on in the novel, without any hesitation, he shoots a stranger in the head for having attempted to capture his son. The man later reaffirms his protective duty while cleaning up after the mess: "This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire" (McCarthy, 2006: 74). Also, despite his son's urging, the man does not want to offer help to a passerby who has been struck by lightning. While the boy keeps begging him to help the stranger, the man gives the definite answer: "No. We can't help him. There's nothing to be done for him" (p. 50), adding "He's going to die. We can't share what we have or we'll die too" (p. 52). When he catches a thief who has stolen their cart filled with their belongings, the man takes revenge on the culprit by forcing him to take off all his clothes, intending to have him die of the cold, despite his son desperately asking him to have mercy on the thief. Towards the end of the novel, he also kills another man who shoots a flare gun at him, having mistaken him for an enemy.

Yet, all these actions of the man make sense to the reader because to be a "hero" in a post-apocalyptic setting one has to forsake the traditional qualities that define it as he is dealing with the unfamiliar and unimaginable. Traditional heroism will not help the man and his son survive so he cannot do things the way he used to in the old world. He needs to adjust to the new circumstances using the adaptive tools of the antihero so as to thrive in the hostile environment. McCarthy depicts these anti-heroic characteristics of his protagonist to display how masculinity adjusts itself to the post-apocalyptic setting, breaking down the paradigm of the hero and arguing that gender traits are social constructs. The unique situation allows for the readjustment of gender roles to showcase the new type of hero that does not abide by the traditional binary gender division.

As an antihero, the man is not a masculine ideal in a traditional sense either. When it comes to gender relations, the absence of formal rules and norms in such a post-apocalyptic society is significant because in a regular community they usually "form the basis and define the constraints for how organizations and individuals act and interact, also in relation to the environment." These rules and norms "set conditions for the division of labour in the household and the community, and directly and indirectly determine women and men's access to and control over resources." (Sida, 2016: 2).

3. A POST-FEMINIST ATTEMPT

Living in an environment almost entirely depleted of resources, the characters in *The Road* are forced to adjust their gender roles to fit a new division of labor that is more suitable for the situation. Once the man's wife has ended her own life because she has had enough of the cruel world, the man takes over the roles of both the father and mother, assuming all the responsibilities of raising, nurturing, and protecting his son. The man even delivers the boy himself: "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" (McCarthy, 2006: 59), which symbolically suggests that he has taken up the ultimate role of motherhood by "giving birth" to his son. The man also nurtures his son by constantly searching and hunting for food to give to him no matter how scarce it is and hard to find, sometimes sacrificing his own portion so that the boy can have enough to eat. He protects him by keeping "constant watch" (p. 24) on his son. He also takes care of the boy's emotional needs while always reminding his son that they are still "the good guys" out there, to keep up their morale. In addition, the two also keep calling each other, to reassure themselves that despite the lurking danger, they still have each other. These practices are quite different from many mainstream cultures, where mothers and women are supposed to take on these child-rearing responsibilities.

Critic Berit Åström (2018) comments on this expansion of the fatherly role explaining:

Expectations in many cultures demand that mothers be tender, nurturing and self-sacrificing. By contrast, fathers in many cultures are not required to care for their children, so if they choose to, they are treated as exceptional. Thus, the father's care for his son in The Road demonstrates a 'triumphant rugged masculinization of childcare.' (pp. 113-114)

So one could say that the post-apocalyptic setting and the anti-heroic mode in *The Road* allow the protagonist to transcend the boundaries between the mother and the father, the male and the female, as well as the hero and the villain, so that he can better protect his child. Seen through this lens, it seems as if these

two elements played an important role in encouraging the readers to reflect on and challenge their own hegemonic thinking regarding gender.

This transcending of the gender-binary thinking can be viewed as a post-feminist gesture as pointed out by Åström (2018) in her article "Post-Feminist Fatherhood and the Marginalization of the Mother in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*", which clearly points out that most critics of McCarthy have sided with the author and defended him against feminist criticism. Åström (2018) explains that much feminist criticism directed at Cormac McCarthy's treatment of women is usually overturned on the grounds that they are either "oversimplifications or simply missing the point, failing to take into account the ingenuity, subtlety or genius of the text" (p. 113). In addition, it has been proposed that "McCarthy's writing needs to be 'rescue[d]...from accusations of misogyny'" (King, 2011: 639 as cited in Åström, 2018: 113). These suggestions not only imply that "to examine critically the representation of women in McCarthy's novels is to focus on irrelevancies" (p. 113) but also confirm that many critics of McCarthy have approached his works from a post-feminist perspective: a view that feminism bears no relevance to today's society because "many or all of the goals of feminism have already been achieved" (The CanLit Guides Editorial Team, 2013). In the field of feminist literature, the term "post-feminism" can suggest an anti-feminist point of view or imply the belief that feminism is already dead or has long become irrelevant.

4. THE "EXTINCTION OF WOMEN" AND SEXISM IN *THE ROAD*

Despite the popular claim that any feminist approach to McCarthy's works—especially *The Road*—is not relevant because of their post-feminist position, an ecofeminist point of view reveals a totally different story: there is a correlation between the author's biased treatment of women and nature, which can harm the novel's well-perceived position as an example of ecological writing. Literary ecofeminism investigates the relationships between women and nature in literature and points to the correlation between the oppression of women and nature. Through this lens, it is revealed that while the man's roles are expanded to include those of a mother as previously discussed, McCarthy eliminates the mother (the man's wife) and leaves other female characters off balance. Also, at various points in the story, women and nature are similarly treated as property/commodities/tools meant to keep the males alive.

There has long been debate surrounding McCarthy's sexism and misogyny. Some critics claim that McCarthy mainly uses women as tools to advance his plots. Juxtaposing McCarthy with another male author deemed to be misogynic, critic Willard Greenwood (2009) observes: "His tendency to treat women as mere devices to further the plots of men could be fairly compared to the tendency of that other great American writer, Philip Roth," adding "McCarthy's characters tend to inhabit predominantly masculine settings. His female characters are all flat" (p. 19). Other critics have noted that "Women do not fare nearly so well" in McCarthy's books (Al-Dhamari and Siddiqui, 2017: 971) as they are marked by "The absence of fully developed female characters" (p. 972). In addition, it has been pointed out that there are three phenomena regarding McCarthy's women. First, there is an "absence of fully developed female characters" (p. 971). If there are such women, they do not fare so well (p. 971). And even when they persist, bad things usually happen to them as there is an "implied destructive potential of most females who do appear" (p. 972). And the portrayal of women in *The Road* confirms all these assumptions.

Most scenes in the novel are inhabited and ruled by men. Almost all of the characters who have some lines to say and contribute to the themes of the story are male: the kidnapper, the old man Eli, the thief, and the boy's rescuer. There are absolutely no fully developed female characters in the novel. The only major female character, the man's wife and the boy's mother, apparently does not fare so well as she cuts her life short, presumably to escape from the barbaric world. It is interesting that McCarthy chooses to end the life of the only major female character prematurely in *The Road*. Critics have pointed out that McCarthy goes out of his way to eliminate this sole significant female character, "the novel's disturbing investment in getting rid of the mother," (Morgenstern, 2014), for political/ideological reasons, arguing that it suggests the author's attempt to challenge and downplay traditional motherhood while calling attention to a revamped version of fatherhood. This reinforces the claim that women are just tools to highlight the grandeur of this modified type of masculinity exemplified by the character of the man. Critic Naomi Morgenstern (2014) calls attention to the age-old association between women and death that McCarthy employs in this novel, stating:

This equation (women = death) is a familiar one, as old as the hills; and yet this project of getting rid of the mother, I would contend, partakes both of the desire to produce a kind of eternal logocentric-transcendent-present-time of masculine relation (for which reproduction is both required and disavowed), and at the same time betrays an identification with—of all things!—mothering. (p. 42)

What can be inferred from the above quotation is that McCarthy decides to kill off the only major female character in the novel in order to make motherhood irrelevant in the post-apocalyptic setting, with the intention of highlighting the masculine bond between the man and his son. The author does not seem to think that motherhood is essential in this post-apocalyptic world, where traditional values are called into question. Evidence of this lies in the fact that all through the story, the reader can see stark differences between the man's and the wife's treatment of their son. In contrast to the man's ultimate care and love for the son, the reader sees no evidence of the mother's tenderness towards her son. Overwhelmed by her own fear and guided by her selfishness, the woman distances herself from the boy and her family. She is portrayed as an illogical being, who could not care less about the boy's emotional and physical well-being.

The parallel between the man and his wife is of ultimate importance because it informs the reader about McCarthy's political stance regarding gender roles and their connection to environmental crises. Because the ultimate focus of the novel is on the father and his son, the reader does not perceive that the woman has any role or any chance in instilling her personal values in her son, even if these values and personal decisions contradict the man's belief and McCarthy's ideology. Not much is explained about her decision to leave the world except for the fact that the woman decides to cut her life short because she does not want to stay alive simply to await a sure and violent death. As Åström (2018) points out, while the mother is portrayed as totally unrelated to "the emotional and physical survival of the man and the boy," critics condemn her for abdicating her responsibility, "accusing her of an 'abject lack of pity', an inability to 'think beyond the limited scope of the self', and making 'immoral' decisions" (pp. 124-125). In a story which has "hope" as a key theme, the woman represents the ultimate lack of it and at times serves as a symbol of death itself. The reader senses that she has succumbed to her fate long before her actual suicide when she says "They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I don't dream at all" (McCarthy, 2006: 57). When the man tries to convince her that they could survive the situation, she dismisses him immediately:

*We're survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.
Survivors? she said.
Yes.
What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film.*

(p. 55)

The woman identifies herself as a lover of Death: "You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot", to which the man replies "Death is not a lover" (pp. 56-57). And even after her passing, she is portrayed as a haunting spirit and a messenger of death, who comes back in the man's dreams to haunt him, luring him towards death:

In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell. Her smile, her downturned eyes...He mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death. He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds.... (p. 18)

The woman's association with death and her denial of hope are highly significant because they serve to reinforce McCarthy's scheme of highlighting male characters and their attributes while downplaying those of female figures. Simply put, the woman does not want to live so she deserves to be eliminated from the storyline. She cannot harbor or imagine hope and is therefore portrayed as a nemesis—an enemy to the survival of the human race as represented by the boy. Not only the man's wife but also the man's mother refuses to cling to hope. She is another female character who does not belong to the "carrying the fire" clan as Åström (2018) points out:

In contrast, there is only one brief mention of the man's mother as someone who would not allow fires in the dining-room fireplace, since that would blacken the bricks... In other words, she refuses to 'carry the fire'—an important definition of humanity in the novel ... (p. 117)

That McCarthy chooses to portray the woman and other minor female characters in such a negative light sheds light on the author's attitudes towards the limited roles women are expected to play, which seem to be those supporting and facilitating the more significant and important stories and missions of men. McCarthy's scheme in marginalizing female characters while putting the spotlight on the men is further affirmed by a post-feminist observation that the man exemplifies a new type of masculinity that has adjusted itself to a post-apocalyptic world. Critic Morgenstern (2014) points out that many readers are fascinated by the man's "intimate care" for his son, which marks a special type of masculinity:

The rewarding surprise of The Road, for many readers, seems to be the record of intimate care provided by the man for his son (as he washes his hair, gives him swimming lessons, feeds him, and more generally reassures him). And this is a father who must manage, in the most charged of circumstances, the end of the world, the work of orchestrating separation and individuation. Certainly, The Road is a text for our time as we encounter the triumphant rugged masculinization of childcare. (p. 42)

The above quotation highlights how the man has created a new meaning for manhood. Being a single father at the end of the world, the man is praised for doing his best to ensure the best quality care he can provide for his child despite the many unfortunate circumstances. However, it must be noted that this “triumphant rugged masculinization of childcare” and this new type of anti-heroism come at a cost. McCarthy chooses to celebrate this new type of fatherhood at the cost of the mother’s life. In order for the man to be able to truly provide the ultimate care for his son in this extreme post-apocalyptic situation, McCarthy must get rid of the mother.

In this, *The Road* “participates in a continuing cultural trend of marginalizing mothers in order to privilege fathers” comments Åström (2018) while elaborating:

The Road constructs the mother as lacking care, love, warmth, nurturing and survival skills. She contributes nothing to the family or the story, beyond giving birth to the child and acting as a foil for the father, who provides for the boy’s physical and emotional needs. In so doing, the narrative represents this mother specifically and motherhood more generally as irrelevant. The novel participates in a continuing cultural trend of marginalizing mothers in order to privilege fathers. (p. 125)

Other critics also agree with Åström about how McCarthy undermines the mother and son relationship in order to highlight the selfless love the man has for his son and to create a post-apocalyptic fatherhood. Among them is Kuhne (2012), who points out in his article entitled “Gender Roles after the Collapse: Women in American Post-Apocalyptic Fiction” that in the majority of his books, McCarthy habitually gets rid of “any major women characters because the theme of the novel concerns not only the will to survive but also the nature of the father-son relationship” (p. 24).

5. AN ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN AND NATURE

The extinction or underrepresentation of women in the novel also correlates with the way nature is treated. Esteemed as “the first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation” by Andrew O’Hagan, BBC Radio 4 (Johns-Putra, 2016: 1) and “the most important environmental book ever written,” by George Monbiot, *The Guardian* (p. 1), *The Road* has been widely praised for raising environmental concerns about ecological destruction and human extinction. Ironically, the absence of meaningful portrayals of female characters mirrors the core cause of environmental problems that the novel obviously overlooks: inequality. This classic problem, which is omnipresent in *The Road*, speaks to the statistics and facts concerning current environmental problems as Joane Nagel (2016) points out:

We [can] see that more women than men die in climate-related natural disasters...and conservative men and their interests drive the climate change denial machine. We also see that climate policymakers who embrace big science approaches and solutions to climate change are predominantly male with an economic agenda that marginalizes the interests of women and developing economies. (Gender and Climate Change, para. 1)

Agreeing that patriarchy drives social inequality and the exploitation of nature, Karen J. Warren (2000) suggests that “there are important connections between the unjustified domination of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature” (p. 1), which *The Road* apparently overlooks.

This research article argues that McCarthy’s creation of post-feminist masculinity in a post-apocalyptic setting comes at the cost of killing and downplaying his female characters while also undermining the status of nature, despite his novel’s façade as an ecological work. An ecofeminist approach reveals the novel as an exemplification of how patriarchy subjugates women as they subordinate nature, while offering no solutions on how to overcome this oppression. The males in the story, the man and the boy included at some point, treat women and nature as property and tools for their survival.

Apart from the man’s wife, there are no other meaningful female characters in the novel. Most women in the story are presented as helpless victims and convenient tools for the survival of the male. They merely exist to make the lives of the men possible or more bearable in this post-apocalyptic world marked by bleak and barren landscapes. The prime example of this is in the scene where, one late evening, the man and the boy see a group of four men passing by, guarding an obviously pregnant woman. Early the following morning, they notice “a thin stem of smoke was rising out of the woods ahead” (McCarthy, 2006: 196). When they search the site, they see “a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (p. 198). Even though

the reader is not directly told about what has happened, it is not too difficult to infer that the four men have forced the baby out of the pregnant woman and turned him into their food. The woman has been captured and raped in order, literally, to produce food for the men. Here motherhood is still about continuing the human race but in another totally distorted sense. This very much confirms critics' comments that McCarthy's women are usually tools for the survival of the men. This scene unavoidably invites the reader to make a comparison between McCarthy's treatment of his female characters and that of the cannibalistic men to their female victims. Just like the man's wife, whose suicide allows the man to become the hero of the story, these female slaves are forced to sacrifice their babies for the survival of men. While the man and the boy are portrayed as curators of culture—the bearers of fire, women and nature are tools to make that possible for them. This shows that McCarthy has a very limited view of women's role in post-apocalyptic writing. The roles of women in this male-imagined post-apocalypse are as sex slaves and "food producers," the story even implies that once the men have run out of food, they will certainly turn on these women.

The only female character, apart from the man's wife and the boy's mother, that has some lines to say in the dialogues is the wife of the boy's rescuer, who miraculously appears at the end of the story. She tries to extend her motherly care to the boy, to console and to connect to him, knowing that he has just lost his dear father. Yet, the boy dismisses her almost immediately. He chooses, rather, to think and talk to his deceased father in his head, which implies that even if the story continues, she can easily be dismissed from the boy's life. These two examples suggest how easy it is for women to be eliminated when it comes to the male narrative of the survival of men.

Comparing McCarthy's treatment of female characters to that of other renowned male authors, Al-Dhamari and Siddiqui (2017) sum up:

The absence of women in his stories limits McCarthy from joining the company of canonical writers such as Shakespeare and Faulkner. McCarthy's male characters, while they are complex, are not offset by any fully imagined female ones, and in this way, he not only departs from an important convention of modern fiction, but also limits the imaginative scope of his narratives. Therefore, the female characters that do appear in most of his novels tend to be peripheral, and to represent essentialized aspects of femininity. (p. 972)

It is arguable that like women, nature is also peripheral in *The Road*, in which the unfair portrayal of women is paralleled by its unjust treatment of nature in spite of the novel's reputation as an example of ecological writing that emphasizes its settings so much.

Critic Tim Edwards (2008) proposes that one "should consider how McCarthy's novel seems to present landscape as text" (p. 56), which calls the reader's attention to how the environment is portrayed in this particular novel. My argument is that the novel's setting is of great importance because *The Road* portrays the human subjugation of nature through what Edwards (2008) calls a "deathscape" (p. 56)—a waste land that manifests the irrecoverable harm humans have caused to nature. Plants, animals, humans themselves, including landscapes and the whole civilization are on the verge of oblivion. The following excerpt gives a general idea of what Edwards means by a "deathscape," as seen through the eyes of the novel's protagonist:

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. Farther along were billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered...He got the binoculars out of the cart and stood in the road and glassed the plain down there where the shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste. Nothing to see. (McCarthy, 2006: 8)

Throughout the story, signs of intoxication and death are everywhere. In this post-apocalyptic landscape, rivers are contaminated and plants fail to thrive: "Below in the little valley the still gray serpentine of a river. Motionless and precise. Along the shore a burden of dead reeds..." (McCarthy, 2006: 6). Almost all animals have already become extinct: "There was yet a lingering odor of cows in the barn and he stood there thinking about cows and he realized they were extinct. Was that true? There could be a cow somewhere being fed and cared for. Could there? Fed what? Saved for what?" (p. 120). Life is fragile as the air has become toxic and unbreathable: "The grainy air. The taste of it never left your mouth" (p. 20). Most of humanity has gone as the majority of the people have died either of diseases or murder, and their bodies are scattered everywhere: "The mummied dead everywhere" (p. 24). When the man reminisces about the first year after the ultimate incident that changed everything, the horror was extreme: "Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road" (pp. 32-33). And not long after that, corpses were everywhere: "Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunk in their rotten clothes" (p. 47). From then society totally collapsed, followed by the decline of

humanity. Some of the lucky ones were spared and turned to cannibalism due to extreme food scarcity, and they are the reason why the man and his son have to be on constant watch.

Natural disasters are common as if to hasten the end of it all. Earthquakes, wildfires, abnormal or extreme weather conditions all suggesting something on the scale of a nuclear winter. Society has disintegrated and human civilization has collapsed while technological advancements have failed to keep the promise of making life better for humanity: "No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather" (p. 12). When the man and the boy come across a deserted dam, the boy gets to learn a lesson about the old way of life when science and technology still made sense:

What is that, Papa?
It's a dam.
What's it for?
It made the lake. Before they built the dam that was just a river down there. The dam used the water that ran through it to turn big fans called turbines that would generate electricity.
To make lights.
Yes. To make lights....
Will the dam be there for a long time?
I think so. It's made out of concrete. It will probably be there for hundreds of years. Thousands, even.
Do you think there could be fish in the lake?
No. There is nothing in the lake.

(pp. 19-20)

The irony in the above excerpt is overwhelming. The physical structure of the dam will probably last for centuries but it will not be able to support a single life, which ironically defeats its whole purpose. It points to the vicious cycle of human exploitation of nature. Humans cut down and kill trees while destroying the habitats of countless animals to build a dam to generate electricity and to serve as storage for water, a source of life. Nature is sacrificed to make life a little more convenient for human beings. Yet in the end, no one gains anything and only nature suffers the consequences.

*Once there were brook trout in the streams 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. ...**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** [emphasis added]. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (McCarthy, 2006: 286-287)*

The "maps and mazes" on the Earth's surface record the irrecoverable harm that humans have done to the environment and speak to their failure to preserve the planet. Humans have played a key role in destroying their own habitat. This passage overthrows the perception that "Man, animal and earth are connected in a web of kinship" (De Bruyn, 2010: 788), while pointing to the superior status of human beings and treating them as the central element of existence.

Despite its acute portrayal of the human destruction of nature, *The Road* falls short in executing a meaningful ecocritical narrative as there is still an anthropocentric overtone governing the story. Apparently, McCarthy's mistreatment of women in the novel is paralleled by the "anthropocentrism" that underpins its account of environmental destruction as "the novel mourns the loss of humans rather than nonhuman nature" (Johns-Putra, 2016: 521) and the environment. Trees have fallen, plants are no more, all species of animals have died out, the environmental world as we know it has become extinct, yet the ultimate focus of the novel lies in the fate of two male human beings while failing to emphasize their meaningful relation to organisms in their physical surroundings. There are areas where *The Road* fails to do justice to both women and nature, which undermines its position as a piece of ecological writing. Apparently, because the novel is set on celebrating the survival of the two main male characters and the bond between them while emphasizing a new type of hero championing this post-apocalyptic landscape, everything else is subordinated to that cause. The man exhibits the attitude of "I'll kill anyone who touches you [the boy]" (McCarthy, 2006: 77), which clearly explains that he is willing to do anything and everything for their survival, and also suggests a very consumerist attitude. Since the major part of the story follows the two males on their struggle to find the food necessary for them to stay alive, everything else serves that ultimate purpose of consumption. This way, the novel's storylines are mainly about taking more things away from the earth, without giving anything back to it.

The food bunker scene ultimately serves as an excellent metaphor/illustration for consumerism and sexism. An excessive amount of unused food, all of it processed, is kept in a fully-fledged storage facility while all wasteful disposable items such as plastic utensils and paper plates, are hoarded there for unexplained

reasons. Apparently, the bunker “is not a natural place, but an artificial, man-made shelter with processed food, ‘an industrial Eden whose goods can be consumed but not renewed’ (Warde, 2010: 134 as cited in Grewe-Volpp, 2013: 229). Also, these provisions are to be consumed and used by men to prolong the lives of males only. Women do not have a fair share in any of the story’s victories. In the same way nature has become subservient to the survival of the male protagonists since to the man and the boy, mountains and forests “only serve as hiding places from the cannibals” (p. 229), while rivers and seas are places to clean and refresh themselves.

Thus, the novel promotes the better treatment of neither nature nor women. In this light, the phrase “carrying the fire” that the man and the boy keep rehearsing can suggest the handing down of patriarchal capitalist values to the next generations. The fact that both women and nature conspire to serve the existence of the two central male characters in *The Road* leads the reader to think that the author more or less endorses the idea of anthropocentrism and to see that McCarthy still adheres to the “static gendered relations” rather than defying them (p. 232), which essentially compromises the novel’s status as a celebrated part of the environmental writing canon.

What prevents *The Road* from being a justified work of ecological writing is the fact that the novel fails to raise and respond to important questions regarding the unfair treatment of women and nature, and also fails to challenge the portrayal of patriarchy and hegemonic gender relations at the end of the world. The novel essentially ignores key questions such as “What more significant roles can women play in post-apocalyptic literature, in which they can meaningfully contribute to the shaping and crafting of a sustainable ecological narrative?” and “How can a novel actively engage in a discourse on the possibility of humanity having a truly sustainable future relationship with nature?”. Obviously, we cannot deal effectively with climate or environmental crisis and injustice while simply focusing on the portrayal of patriarchy and only giving a voice to the already privileged.

Because of the strictly limited number of female characters and the way they are presented, *The Road* fails to transcend the “static gender relations,” where men occupy the public space (the road) and women are confined and tied to the roles of caregivers or servers of men. Ultimately, the novel does very little to change this traditional view of gender (p. 232). This claim precisely explains why the only major female character in the story—the man’s wife— is killed off: it is because she refuses to assume the roles of traditional mother and caregiver ascribed to her. Despite its post-feminist appearance, the novel fails to challenge the anthropocentric and male-centered ecological narratives that cause most environmental problems in the first place. Also, while the novel emphasizes the bond between two males, focusing on how they thrive and cope with adversity in a post-apocalyptic space, it offers no solutions or suggestions as to how women and nature can achieve this very same goal. Apparently, the human race and the Earth cannot survive if women and nature cannot thrive but the novel insists on highlighting the triumphs of only the males. Total male domination is not, ultimately, the solution to problems caused by men. In fact, the novel’s implication that only men will be left in the world of *The Road* does away with the sense of hope that the story attempts to build.

6. CONCLUSION

Because of its ultimate “deathscape,” where nature is destroyed beyond any hope of repair and its refusal to offer any vision of an alternative way to live, to redeem or to make the Earth more fit for both women and the environment to thrive in, the world of *The Road* is one at a dead end. The novel fails to offer either women or nature a chance to transcend beyond the fixed roles as victims of male domination in this post-apocalyptic narrative, thus offering no real insight into the need for healthier relations among significant issues such as gender, race and class in ecological writing that are at the heart of environmental injustice.

Thus, rather than living up to its plaudits as an example of environmental writing worthy of much admiration, the novel’s treatment of the environment reaffirms the oppressive human- normative discourse of much popular literature that views animals and the environment as tools to support, sustain and benefit the survival and power of human subjectivity. This recognition is significant as the novel is considered to be part of young adult literature and therefore deals with relatively young readers. Given the power of literature to function as a potent form of persuasion, any unjust portrayal of environmental injustice in this climate fiction based on either race, class, gender, nationality and other factors, should be pointed out. As considerations of these elements, especially regarding gender and the environment, are “crucial to our ability to achieve a just and sustainable future,” it is imperative that “Men and women must work hand in hand to confront the environmental challenges of our time” (UN Environment Programme, n.d.), especially when human extinction is in the question. When it comes to post-apocalyptic literature, this involves fair representations of gender and nature.

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