Self Created Suffering of Human Beings in McCarthy’s The Road

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Abstract: This article analyzes how Cormac McCarthy’s The Road depicts self-destructive situation invited by human beings as a result of their activities of ignoring the inherent worth of ecology/nature. By presenting anthropocentrism and human suffering, McCarthy generates a conflicting response to nature, the woods and human beings in The Road. Critics have reviewed it either as an apocalyptic portrait of nature or as a dismal narrative of human beings by using an unnamed man and a boy as a representative of endangered human beings in the encroached woods. The former reading tends to criticize nature lacking its strength to support human beings and the latter situates human beings as the last witness of the endangered nature. In this context, this article argues that human beings’ suffering results from their negligence and their appropriation of nature in The Road because its setting, the woods, reveals the results of human wars which lead to ecological, cultural and existential loss. This article explores the issue of the light of Val Plumwood’s idea that ecological crisis of human reasoning that leads to self-suffering of human beings. The study infers that human beings endeavor to empower themselves by ignoring nature and even other humans, but such an attitude endangers all humans and nature alike.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, ecological crisis, attitude, encroachment, ignore

1. Introduction

Cormac McCarthy in his novel, The Road, depicts through his characters and setting the bleak apocalyptic condition of nature leading human beings to irremediable ecological, cultural and ethical loss. By projecting his concern for human existence into his writings, McCarthy exposes dismal environment of the woods and human suffering in The Road. The protagonists, an unnamed man and his son, a boy, suffer from hunger, thirst and insecurity in the woods. As the story begins from the awakening of the man’s dreadful dream in the barren woods, the sun is grey and the lake is black. It looks dark, barren, silent and godless everywhere (1-2). The protagonists wander from place to place with their gun and fire in hands in search of food and security. They go from bunker to bunker to find the stored foods and clothes but they hardly comment on human interest that endangers the woods, nature, due to wars. Human beings focus on the self; ignore nature and even their other fellow beings but this attitude gives rise to their own suffering in an apocalyptic ecological setting. Such a disregard of human beings to nature is an attempt of empowering themselves but it adversely endangers human existence.

2. Methods

This article applies Val Plumwood’s idea of “The Blindspots of Centrism and Human Self-enclosure” and L. White’s concept of “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” Their ideas allow the reader to see human beings’ myopic anthropocentric tendencies as the prime causes of world ecological crisis that are likely to lead both human and nature to an end. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives from these aforementioned concepts, this article tries to analyze McCarthy’s ecological imagination in The Road.

3. Discussion

Set in the “grey” site of the woods, McCarthy’s The Road portrays its setting as the battlefield of ensuing wars. It depicts the gloomy environment of the woods where rivers are black, fruits in the trees are dried and the bunkers are deserted. It also portrays that human beings hardly confess their domination over other parts of nature and they define nature-human relation in terms of place, society and individual perception. The man in The Road is concerned about his son’s survival, and goes to the bunkers for stored stuffs whereas he ignores the helpless situation of nature in the woods as if humans are separate from nature. In fact, human beings are prone to their own disaster as Eric Hage argues, “it would be the violent nature of human race itself: “We’re going to do ourselves in the first,” (141). Human beings’ self-centered attitude is detrimental to their lives. Nature is an integrated system for understanding all its parts but humans ignore their own race and nature alike which leads them to face further crisis.

Giving importance to their self-existence, human beings ignore their relativity with nature. They even assert their power in the endangered nature but they fail to realize that they will not be secured if nature is not secured. Analyzing the human activities against nature, Hanna Stark in her article “All These Things He Saw and Did Not See” remarks, “The Road offers an anthropocentric vision of the end of the world in which humans are the final witness and also in which the end of the human is also the end of the world” (80). By saying so, Stark highlights the survival of humans and nature to be interdependent. However, no human supremacy and witness sustains on the earth when other things and beings cease to support human beings. In fact, human beings are losers as the earth possesses self regulatory systems unlike the humans.

McCarthy’s protagonists’ ongoing suffering results from human ego to subjugate other humans. The woods have been
a battlefield to impose superiority of one group of humans on another; nuclear war and toxicity have changed nature into barren and desert land. Though it is an irrecoverable loss for humans, human beings still make the woods, nature a war field. Surprisingly they try to find foods and shelter in the destroyed woods as the man observes nature in the country so that he can get conducive environment for his son's sake. However, he still shifts his focus from nature to son when he finds it unfavorable as "... he knew only that the child was his warrant" (3). Unequivocally for a father his son is all in all but the man's quest of his son's life depends on healthy environment of nature. As Jordan J. Domini remarks, "The real challenge left facing the son at the novel’s end is whether or not he will be able to retrieve nature, ..." (144). Future of the boy or of human beings depends on human sensibility to secure ecological balance. Whereas, human insensitivity and injustice toward nature ignores their self-justice embedded in ecologically balanced nature. Illustrating the past environmental balance, the last conversation between the woman and the boy reminds, "... Of a thing which could not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (307). Human beings are the late comers on the earth yet their anthropocentric attitude has dismantled the earlier system of nature.

The earlier undisturbed nature is free from toxicity and disorder but human insensitivity and polarity has destroyed nature and humans alike. Though the novel ends with the reminiscence of ecologically balanced nature, it reflects the conflicting attitude of humans to nature and their own kind. The man has to challenge insecurity till his death and his boy is left alone in the deserted woods. The ending provides another old man and a woman to rescue and support the boy; it also tries to give a positive note for readers that the boy seems to continue human existence (303-7). Nevertheless, there is no attempt of changing anthropocentricity into eco-friendliness. In fact, ethical, balanced and responsible uses of natural resources can only restore human survival on the earth. Linda Woodson's comment on other critiques of The Road contends, “Many have placed The Road into the genre of apocalyptic literature, and it certainly fits there, in both its vision of the artist" (87). Grey environment of the woods depicts the novel as the report of human misery in the barren woods. But the struggle of the man and his son for their existence in such apocalyptic nature of the woods implies that if humans are to give importance on their existence, they have to protect nature for their own sake. Anthropocentricity underestimates the complexity and irreplaceability of nature whereas encroachment on nature endangers human existence. Anthropocentric attitude ignores how the depletion of natural resources leads humans to their death as Plumwood argues in Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason that centrisms is tested by behavior rather than avowal (98). By the time humans realize their encroachment on nature, they are about to lose their life as the narrative of The Road “Their progress was a torture (296)” depicts self- destructive result of anthropocentricity.

Without realizing human dependency on nature, there is no escape from human suffering. Bill McKibben's The End of Nature argues, “We have deprived nature of its independence... is nothing but us” (54). Human beings boast upon their supremacy of governing nature while this attitude leads to self-disasters. McCarthy's protagonist becomes happy when he finds foods in the bunker, "The richness of a vanished world"(147). It certainly provides a short relief for the man but does not assure his security in the deserted woods. As the man further says, "Every day is a lie... But you are dying. That is not a lie" (254). He continuously ignores disastrous nature and assures his son that they are safe while his suffering forces him to confess his dependency on nature.

Human hubris to hold power over other humans conducts wars making nature a tool for maintaining superiority over other parts of nature and other humans as well. Scientific development is also an outcome of human progression. However, manipulation of nature ignoring its ecological system is a suicidal attempt but not human progression. Despite the apocalyptic environment of his surrounding, the man moves from one corner to another of the woods in The Road. He even ignores the prevailing calamity in nature but he cannot ignore his son's life even when his health begins to worsen to support his son.

This scene finely projects that human being is the part of nature and endangering nature is not human supremacy over nature but is self-evasion, self-deception and self-destruction of human beings. The boy and the man are the victim of anthropocentricity as the scene of "lead colored sea" and "the earth itself contracting with the cold" portrays the encroached parts of nature (279). Moreover, human existence depends on their response to nature as Plumwood argues in The ecological crisis of reason, “The Otherisation of nature bears on a key question of justice-- the concern with obstacles to justice, especially forms of partiality and self-imposition that prevent us from giving others their due” (11). Plumwood focuses on equal existence between self and other, and justice for other things and beings is self-justice. She views that partiality between self and other is an obstacle to have justice between one individual to another and human to nonhuman parts of nature. The otherising concept gives importance to self and ignores other while nothing is apart from nature.

Human existence depends on nature and its other parts as it establishes equality, order and justice to all things and beings. However, human beings create a barrier between their self and other that does not allow them to live peacefully. Like Plumwood’s argument, McCarthy's characters experience panic and pain from other human beings and nature in the woods. The man ignores the bitter reality of ensuing war. Everywhere there is panic but the man disagrees with his wife, “The hundred nights they’d sat up arguing the pros and cons of self-destruction” (60). Natural disaster, human encroachment on nature and even anti-human concepts of human beings all are destructive and against human beings. Even so, human hubris to hold their supremacy over nature and other humans do not allow him to think for endangered nature and human misery as an interrelated issue. Instead, he restlessly moves ahead in search of safe place having no concern for nature.

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Nature is the source of human life but human beings suffer when they ignore its contribution to maintain environmental balance as A. N. Whitehead writes in *Science and the Modern World*:

The key to the mechanism of evolution is the necessity for the evolution of a favorable environment, conjointly with the evolution of any specific type of enduring organisms of great permanence. Any physical object which by its influence deteriorates its environment, commits suicide. (109)

Whitehead focuses on maintaining ecological balance while inventing new technologies. He argues that without reducing or eliminating adverse effect of human invention, no scientific invention is safe for human beings. Human beings think to subjugate nature and design its parts in favor of them while the toxicity resulted from their productions adversely affects human beings.

Scientific development comforts humans but encroachment on nature and human misery go in parallel way as the protagonists of *The Road* go through the toxic and unsafe environment of the woods. McCarthy’s characters’ suffering also focuses on self-incurred problem of human beings as the narrative evokes:

Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all. (28)

Human beings try to hide the fact of their encroachment on nature but they cannot escape away from their unjust response to nature. Whitehead’s remark on the drawbacks of scientific invention and the effect of deserted woods on the man and his son sound the same issue. The term “frailty of everything revealed at last” also remarks suffering of human beings as the byproduct of encroachment on nature.

Nature has its own mechanism to secure its things and beings, and human suffering starts from their negligence upon ecological balance. Both the issues of suffering of McCarthy’s characters and of the endangered woods depict the self-projected suffering of humans. As Edward Wilson views in *The environmental ethic*, “An undisturbed forest rarely discloses its internal anatomy with such clarity. Its edge is shielded by thick secondary growth or else, along the river bank, the canopy spills down to ground level” (153). Wilson argues that nature itself protects its parts and maintains its balance if it is free from human encroachment. As the term, “undisturbed forest” makes aware of encroachment upon nature, human beings suffer when they neglect nature. They have no option for being alive without consuming the parts of nature. However, random exploitation of nature excluding its existence is a self-suicide for human beings themselves.

Unlike Wilson’s remarks on “undisturbed forest”, McCarthy mostly focuses on insecurity of his protagonists is due to other human beings but the reader argues that it is because of encroachment upon nature as the childhood of the man mentions:

The shore was lined with birchtrees that stood bone pale against the dark of the evergreens beyond. The edge of the lake a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered, the windfall trees of a hurricane years past. The trees themselves had long been sawed for firewood and carried away. His uncle turned the boat and shipped the oars . . . This was the perfect day of his childhood. (11-12)

McCarthy compares past life of the man with his present suffering. He observes past life as happy and prosperous in the lap of nature. Whereas the present suffering of human beings is because of war and deforestation as “bone pale” trees imply. Growing population and natural resources cannot be proportionate and no human life sustains in the absence of natural sources. Yet the misuse of natural resources has been a threat against human existence as L. White argues:

Our present combustion of fossil fuels threatens to change the chemistry of the globe’s atmosphere as a whole, with consequences which we are only beginning to guess. With the population explosion, the carcinoma of planless urbanism, the now geological deposits of sewage and garbage, surely no creature other than man has ever managed to foul its nest in such short order. (144).

White argues that human knowledge about nature and its governing facts are still under research. However, human beings are responsible for the environmental hazards. They channelize nature on their own way while it results into destruction. Since urbanization and inventions in defiance of nature are against nature and human alike. Ecological imbalance is a multi - faceted issue and it affects on human existence directly. As McCarthy presents the issue of ongoing encroachment on nature and disregard of human beings to nature:

Down the bridge a hundred feet or so were the blackened remains of tires that had been burned there. He stood looking at the trailer. What do you think is in there? he said. I don’t know.

We’re not the first ones here. So probably nothing. (47)

McCarthy’s characters suffer from hunger, insecurity and thirst also but they deliberately emphasize more on human beings than on nature. The statement, “We’re not the first ones here. So probably nothing” clarifies how anthropocentricity has caused human suffering.

Anthropocentricity underestimates and neglects the existence of other parts of nature. However, as Plumwood argues in her *The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, the othering idea is a crisis of rationality, morality, and imagination of human beings (98). The more priority human beings give to them and ignore others, the more suffering they create for
them. Like Plumwood, McCarthy portrays the scene in *The Road* that once green and populated land turns into unknown land and the man shows his ignorance to it:

They’d not eaten in two days. In two more they would begin to get weak. He climbed the bank through the cane to check the road. Dark and the black and trackless where it crossed the open country. The winds had swept the ash and from the surface. Rich lands at one time. No sign of life anywhere. . . . Come on, he said. We have to go. (215-16)

Dualistic nature of human beings separates them from other parts of nature. As McCarthy’s protagonist moves to open country to find food but he turns back when he finds disaster prevailed on the area. Moreover, he without further delay wants to be away from there to find another place where he can find foods and water. Like Plumwood’s concept of ontological break, the land once green lures the man first but when he finds it empty, he moves away having no concern for why the land has such predicament.

Human longevity is embedded on how nature protects its things and beings. As foods, shelter and all the materials are from nature, there is no human existence without acknowledging their dependency on nature. Lawrence Buell focusing on the environmental writing argues in *Future of Environmental Criticism*, “Environmental writing and criticism offer the promise of correcting against this by refocusing attention on place at the level of either the region or the transnation” (82). Buell argues that the intention of environmental writing is to bring back into the consideration of nature that to connect human being with nature. Like Buell, McCarthy despite his depiction of barrenness of the woods, he concludes his fiction with the description of past glory of nature and human beings’ attachment with it that human being is younger to other things that “all things were older than man” (307). McCarthy focuses more on human beings than on nature throughout his fiction but this concluding twist implies his artistic craft of nature writing that though anthropocentrism thinks human beings superior to nature and its other things and beings, human beings’ suffering is because of their own attitude which cannot situate them in the track of nature. The dismal environment of *The Road* suggests it as a note of self-invited misery of human beings and there is no human survival when they think them apart from nature and a governing body to nature.

4. Conclusion

McCarthy’s *The Road* projects how human beings neglect nature and suffer from hunger and insecurity in nature, the woods. Giving importance to self-interest, human beings ignore nature and even other humans but it results in ecological crisis as Val Plumwood says that separating humans from nature and othering its things and beings is endangering human existence and giving rise to ecological crisis (101). The locale of *The Road* is barren woods where its protagonists, an unnamed man and his son suffer from hunger and face threat from other human beings. The man’s quest of better place and his negligence upon the ongoing disaster upon the woods depicts how anthropocentrism invites self-suffering of humans. The man and his son restlessly suffer from hunger and insecurity in the endangered woods. They find foods and shelter into the bunkers. Yet as the environmental crisis ensuing from war has changed the woods into gray and the water is black, the man and his son cannot assure their lives. Furthermore, the man disregards the site as unknown place when he finds nothing to eat. This attitude is against humans though McCarthy dramatically presents another old man to rescue the boy in the barren woods after his father’s unexpected death. Moreover, the protagonists’ ongoing struggle for existence, the man’s death because of an unidentified shooting by an arrow, barren woods and the memory of comfort life in the lost nature depict how anthropocentrism is inviting self-suffering of humans. Finally, human suffering results from environmental crisis ensued from the self-projected suffering of humans as the last words of *The Road* echo the importance of undisturbed environmental balance that there is no end of human suffering until human beings think that endangering nature is projecting human suffering.

5. Limitation

This study concentrates on how human beings suffer when they focus on self - existence ignoring other things and beings in nature. The finding may lack other issues as eco-feminist reading or even a deep ecological perspective and so on since nature study cannot be limited into a single perspective. Nonetheless, human existence cannot be imagined in the absence of other things and beings.

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