

**STORIES ON *THE ROAD*: TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL IN POST-APOCALYPTIC
SCENARIO**

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Abstract

*Trauma studies, a field that has expanded rapidly over the past decades, has developed as an interdisciplinary field of study which today pervades a wide range of disciplines such as social sciences, history, psychology and literature. Tracing the psychological detriments following a calamity, trauma studies delves on psychological, social and cultural dimensions too pertaining to the field especially within a literary context. The present study attempts to trace the representation of trauma and related experiences in a post-apocalyptic scenario by undertaking an analysis of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, an American classic and an exemplar of post-apocalyptic and trauma fiction. Through an analysis of *The Road* as a heart rending tale of trauma, ordeals and survival, the paper attempts to explore multifarious implications of trauma, thereby also observing the potential of trauma fiction to move beyond the bleak images and the negative tone often accredited to it by offering positive affirmations.*

Key Words: Trauma theory, post- apocalypse, victimisation, survival

Post-apocalyptic fiction, a sub-genre of science fiction features a world where end has occurred due to some catastrophe and characters struggle to survive the place and situation. The past world is a strong presence in such novels since they occur through the recollections, fantasies or speculations of the characters. The loss or the vacuum left by the lost world is featured in these novels and they often portray the aching loss experienced by the characters once they realise the stark contrast between the present world and the past one. Most of the novels belonging to the category have a dystopian setting, featuring the impacts and aftermaths of the apocalypse. *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy is a classic belonging to the genre which sketches a futuristic world

which goes chaotic after an apocalyptic disaster. Set in a post-apocalyptic world, it brilliantly portrays how a cataclysmic event transforms the place into a wasteland with ash and filth spread ubiquitously and with the setting in of a nuclear winter. The present study draws upon trauma theory to effectively analyse the text and tease out the traumatic impacts of an apocalypse on the lives of the characters and their attempts for survival in a post-apocalyptic world.

Trauma theory emerged in the United States in the early 1990s and prominent trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman who were the products of Yale University played a crucial role in contributing significantly to the development of trauma studies. It initially fitted into the frame of psychology and later extended to literary studies through the publications of the prominent trauma theorists. The term ‘trauma theory’ was first used by Caruth in her *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) in which she introduced her thoughts and reflections on Freud’s ideas on trauma and its nature as stated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). She states “. . . in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud’s text, the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3). She emphasises the findings of Freud that trauma is a wound in the mind and that unlike the wound of the body, the wound of the mind extends beyond peripheral healing mechanisms. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud declares that the experience of a trauma repeats itself in the life of the survivor without him being aware of it, or as against his will. This repeated revisiting which Freud calls “‘traumatic neurosis’— emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (Caruth 2). A person who witnesses and survives a calamity develops certain psychological crisis later in life as is illustrated by Freud through an example of train collision. The term coined by Freud was officially acknowledged by American Psychiatric Association in 1980, which later addressed the same as “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD). Caruth defines PTSD in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event . . . [T]he event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly. . . . To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). The unexpected, sudden occurrence of the event confuses the person and hence his consciousness fails to fully comprehend the event. For the same reason, trauma is not understood or experienced by the victims at the time of occurrence, but rather it returns as haunting nightmares and dreams which imply the inherent trauma residing in the victims.

Freud and Lacan define trauma as ‘return of the repressed’ and as ‘sense of absence’ respectively. The theorists put forward an example of a soldier who witnesses violent death around him and who later encounters haunting nightmares as the central image of trauma and related experiences. Caruth points out that trauma arises in a victim of the incident as a result of the “. . . the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (“Unclaimed” 7). According to Shoshana Felman, one of the pioneers of trauma theory, emergence of psychoanalysis, invention of disastrous weapons which caused havoc and destruction during 20th century and repeated use of instruments of law to cope with the traumatic legacies and collective injuries are among the major influences which contributed to the development of trauma theory (2). Holocaust, 9/11 tragedy, World Wars, terrorisms and various infamous riots observed as major traumatic historical episodes, when recollected through narratives, were/are critically analysed in the light of trauma theory. Felman calls 20th century an “era of historic, trials—was in effect a century of traumas and (concurrently) a century of theories of trauma” (1). An important point to be noted here is regarding the reliance of all these theorists on literature to theorise trauma due to its potential to accommodate both the comprehensible and the incomprehensible and hence locating it as an appropriate medium which could encompass the obvious and the obscure. This is the reason why Freud looks into the nature of trauma and its impacts on human psyche through the story told by Tasso in his *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Caruth notes that:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (“Unclaimed” 3) Trauma fiction effectively catalogues the shocks, depression and impacts that a sudden catastrophe has on the people. Hartman points out that trauma fiction problematises its own formal properties, at the levels of reference, subjectivity and narration (547). Michael Rothberg argues that traumatic texts search for a new mode of realism which he calls ‘traumatic realism’ in order to express or articulate a new form of reality. He argues that writers are faced with ‘the demands of extremity’ (14) - an idea which suggests the challenge they face in order to communicate the traumatic knowledge which cannot be fully comprehended or figured out.

Apocalypse is one among the major images in literature while studying trauma and its implications. According to Teresa Heffernan, the turn of the millennium saw a major resurgence

of apocalyptic narrative in film, literature, science, and politics with “its strange pleasure in the catastrophic cleansing of the world, its reassuring division between the righteous and the damned, and its disturbing comfort in knowing absolute finality and order” (150). Through the framing of traumatic experiences, post-apocalyptic fiction traces the complex states of human mind as well as changing paradigms in society and culture.

Chronicling the end of a world order, *The Road* presents a chilling experience to the readers through its fictional world where the green, lush landscape gives way to burned, ash strewn countryside, and an entire population being replaced by half dead victims and survivors. The American classic traces the journey of a father and a son through burned America where they struggle for survival. The characters are given no names which add to the universal significance of the novel. The protagonist is a father, one among the survivors, who takes his child, heading towards the south, for the coast. *The Road* draws in detail the ravaged landscape, barren bottomlands, dominant darkness, biting coldness, burned down cities and desolate countryside. By switching between the past and the present, McCarthy effortlessly plays with temporal dimensions in the novel. Past life manifests through the dreams, reminiscences and musings of the man. He ruminates about the past which is in stark contrast to the ghastly, horrifying present. He is seen to be traumatised by the sudden apocalypse which shattered his life and also by the suicide of his wife who rejected her husband's entreaties. The huge chasm between the past and the present is indicative of the split in the psyche of the victim. The man in the novel is unable to leave behind the traumatic past and hence carries it with him as a burden throughout his journey. He makes many attempts to forget the past and ensuing traumatic memories by convincing himself that he is a survivor who is freed of any tribulations or torments. However, he experiences intense difficulties while undergoing the process. The recurrent dreams about the bygone world, haunts the man leaving him restless and disturbed. In psychoanalytic terms, Freud's notion of “the return of the repressed” in which traumatic happenings that were unprecedented and too appalling to be confronted at the time, resurface later, often through the subconscious, sometimes as dreams. “What he could bear in the waking world he could not by night and he sat awake for fear the dream would return” (McCarthy 137). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud concluded that “. . . these dreams are endeavouring to master the [traumatic] stimulus retrospectively; by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (32). The initial dreams of the man which included the joyous past life, attractively robed wife, paradisiacal Earth, later transforms into terrific ones like dreams of a monstrous creature crawling all over him, his wife dying in a desolate place with no one to care

for her and so on. Traumatic impacts on the man are more intense when compared to the boy who does not hold a pre-disaster world in his memories. His knowledge of the past are second hand, acquired through the stories and narratives of his father. Hence, though the child is shocked at various happenings in their journey, is not traumatised inherently, since, for him, reality is only the present. There is no past for him to compare the present world with.

The novel also known for the ecological concerns it raises, illustrates the impact of despoiled and wasted landscape and environment on the human consciousness. In *The Road*, the demise of humans and the seeming demise of the planet happen simultaneously. The man's life and journey through the cold, inhospitable countryside fills in him despair, fears and hopelessness which add to the trauma he experiences. "Burnt forests for miles along the slopes and snow sooner than he would have thought. No tracks in the road, nothing living anywhere. The fire blackened boulders like the shapes of bears on the starkly wooded slopes" (30). One's surroundings exert immense influence on a person and contribute to the physical, mental and spiritual growth. "The notion of 'place' occupies a rich and interesting position in contemporary trauma theory, both through Geoffrey Hartman's writing on landscape and place, and through Pierre Nora's influential formulation of *lieux de meÂmoire* or 'sites of memory'" (Whitehead 48). The ruined surroundings augment distress in the man who attempts to flee the place. The pesky landscape pictured in the novel also symbolises the psyche of the man which is crammed with ruins and ashes of the past memories. "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 shadowy land smelling of gloom and murk sheds light into the inner mindscape of the protagonist. "The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees" (14). The road which is one among the major symbols in the novel encompasses the spirit, tone and mood of the novel placing it in the category of trauma fiction. The road filled with ashes, corpses, death and decay is enigmatic as presented in the novel. The road presents man with the stark reality in front of him and constantly reminds him of the traumatic conditions circling him. "From daydreams on the road there was no waking" (17). The journey along the road gifts the man day dreams as well as nightmares. The reality is too gruesome and the man finds it impossible to overlook the grotesque scenes on and along the road. Roads are the only things which remain after the catastrophe. The road offers refuge as well as poses threat to the man and his boy. The psyche of the man which contains memories of past glorious life and repressed traumatic remnants of past

and present is appropriately encompassed in the symbol. Journey through the road hence becomes a journey through the mind of the character.

One of the factors which contribute to the success of *The Road* as a trauma fiction is its brilliant employment of symbols and images which serve as appropriate objective correlatives. The pistol which turns out to be an inevitable part of the man, develops into an obligatory accessory without which the existence becomes impossible. The pistol recurs throughout the novel making up a major portion of the story and driving the plot. The man adheres to the pistol, and frequently ensures its presence. It serves dual functions in the novel. Primarily, the pistol stands for all the repressed thoughts and yearnings in the man, and also to the trauma associated with it. The author covertly brings out the connection between the two by suggesting the suicide of the wife using a pistol. Secondly, the pistol is used as a defense mechanism, which hints at how the man depends on his thoughts on a pre-disaster universe to survive the gruesome present. The lines from the novel, “He would jerk upright out of his sleep and slap about him looking for the pistol” (108), “He sat up reaching about for the pistol” (216) emphasise this idea. The author, through the utilisation of the symbol, indicates how disastrous traumatic memories can be. The man repeatedly forces the boy to hold the gun even though the boy is reluctant to do so. This exchange of the gun implies the transference of a traumatic ‘legacy’ from the affected generation to its posterity, and so is emphasised throughout the novel. “Take the gun. I don’t want the gun. I didn’t ask if you wanted it. Take it” (73). “He took the boy’s hand and pushed the revolver into it. Take it, he whispered. Take it. The boy was terrified” (119). During an occasion, the child loses the pistol handed over to him by his father. “Where’s the pistol? He said. The boy froze. He looked terrified” (247). The ‘accidental’ letting go of the revolver points to the reluctance from the part of the succeeding generations to be part of the trauma that fell over their ancestors. The father’s advice to his son to put the gun in his mouth and point it up in case of a crisis, points to the life taking, destructive nature of trauma which is passed on to the boy as a ‘legacy’ from which he cannot escape. “Theories of trans-generational trauma suggest that affect can leak across generations; that a traumatic event which is experienced by one individual can be passed on so that its effects are replayed in another individual one or more generations later” (Whitehead 14). Even as the novel ends, even after the death of his father, the boy is seen to be tightly holding on to the pistol.

According to Saussure, signifiers do not exist once signifieds die away. In *The Road*, one witnesses an ebbing away of language, abstractions and conceptions which too turn out to be of utmost importance while delving on the concept of trauma in the novel.

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (93)

Memory and language find correspondence in the novel. “Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past” (55). The erasure of numerous names and words from the memory of the character signifies end of language itself, through which McCarthy points to the extent of trauma which affects the protagonist. The novel which contains trimmed and apathetic conversations, repetitions, excessive paragraph divisions, minimal use of active verbs, sparse punctuations, and limited diction, denote a ruptured language which is incapable of absorbing and conveying the exact details and particulars in a shattered world. Death of the world goes hand in hand with death of word. The traumatic impacts on the protagonist are reflected in his language. The fractured sentences, abrupt diction, and indifference and immediacy in tone denote the same “. . . when deprivation is too traumatic to be acknowledged, language is refused and the empty space, which is the condition of speech and signification, becomes the tomb in which the lost object is encrypted. Thereafter, whenever the self is plunged into a state of inexpressible mourning, it resorts to this same “magical” but dangerous resolution” (Moglen 126). The language used by the novelist is hence in par with the circumstances in a traumatic, post-apocalyptic world. Along with the physical objects which lay scattered and shattered on the road, the language too is ruptured in the traumatic world. The nothingness which governs the terrain is suggested through the loss of memory and degradation of language.

The dystopian world which McCarthy presents through his novel faultlessly captures the conditions leading to the trauma in the protagonist and his fellow beings. The dystopian setting not just provides a series of tragic events which add to the man’s trauma, but also functions as metaphorical of the inner landscape of the character’s psyche. The man “looked toward the east for any light but there was none” (1). This in a way reveals the dimmed corners of the inner mind of the character itself. With all those savagery, violent encounters, irking nightmares and harrowing occurrences, *The Road* explores trauma, its impacts and survival. The novel being a dreary documentation of an aimless journey, soak up how destruction and trauma seem to encompass everything. Heffernan explains, “post-apocalypse, where the catastrophe has happened but there is no resurrection, no revelation. Bereft of the idea of the end as direction,

truth, and foundation, we have reached the end of the end” (11). When the protagonist in *The Road* laments, “On this road there are no godspoken men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world” (32), we realise, the end has already happened, leaving the survivors in a vile, futile world. However, *The Road* does not seem to stop at this point passively accepting the realities of a traumatic post-apocalyptic world but rather journeys forward to explore the potentials of survival in such a world.

Flight or fight is widely considered as one among the automatic survival responses. Walter Cannon who coined the term ‘fight or flight response’ points to the physical act of flight or fight at the moment of traumatic situations as chief reactions towards trauma. *The Road* puts forward the physical as well as psychological processes of “flight and fight” as the major survival techniques adopted by the characters. The father and the son in *The Road* flee from the place of destruction by moving towards the south in order to escape the wasteland. They make progress on the road and what drives them forward is the ‘fire’ inside them. The post-apocalyptic world is too harsh and hard for the people to survive. The transformed place frequently forces the father to make comparisons with the bygone world, its glories and splendour. But he does not give in. “Where you’ve nothing else, construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (78), he states. Not ready to be confined within the victim stage, the characters show a tendency to move forward. “Are we going to die now? No . . . we’re going to keep going down the road” (92). They flee from the site of trauma as a means to overcome its impacts. And while fleeing, various tactics are employed by the father to make survival easy and possible for them. He constantly tries to make the child believe that they are survivors and not victims. A journey from victimisation to survival is laid bare before the child by the father. He narrates to the boy stories of good men, emphasises on the superiority of life over death, teaches him that they are ‘carrying fire’ and fills in him hope for a better future. The journey through the road hence is metaphorical since it points to a survival technique adopted by the father and his child. The family which makes an appearance towards the end of the novel is also portrayed as proceeding towards the path of survival. They too are seen to be fleeing from the place of distress, despair and destruction. When the boy joins them, the novel ends. Journey metaphor, with which the novel begins, eventually portrays the death of the father towards the end. But unexpectedly, another journey begins in the final pages. The title of the novel thus becomes pregnant with meanings since the entire novel is centred on the journey through the road and it remains the focal point. The road which could be seen as a site of trauma thus transforms to a path of survival for the victims. The novel which entirely focuses on movements and flights that do not halt in

middle effectively suggests the healing journey that the victims undertake from the site of shock and ordeals to a promising future.

Parallel to flight technique, characters also adopt fight as a means to deal with the traumatic conditions. The text which overtly depicts death, destruction, alienation and separation places human will over any other concerns. Though affected by trauma, the major characters do not stay still, or remain defeated. A desire for survival and alleviation is exhibited by them. In spite of being frequently haunted by traumatic outcomes, they do not fall back, but proceed forward, putting up a courageous fight. Though some of the characters fall and perish, unable to survive in a post-apocalyptic universe, the focus is invariably on the characters who make an effort to survive the traumatic post-disastrous world. The novel revolves around the thoughts and actions of these characters which imply the significance attributed by the authors to the healing journey undertaken by the victims in a post-catastrophic environment. The courage and sanguinity of the father are the best lessons that the child absorbs and which drives him forward. The novel though illustrates the death of the man, gives him due reverence persuading the readers to visualise him beyond the label of a 'victim' and thus a journey from victimhood to survival is ensured in the novel.

The Road presents a rebirth after a disastrous end; the new beginning carries with it remains of past and traumatic memories. However, life continues as could be noted through the journey metaphor that lingers throughout the novel. In *The Road*, the present continues its journey bearing and transmitting the traces of the past, at the same time marching towards an uncertain yet a hopeful future.

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