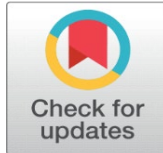
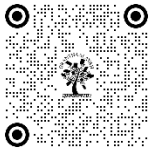


# THE RHETORIC OF ECOPRECARITY: A STUDY OF VULNERABILITY IN THE ROAD BY CORMAC MCCARTHY

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## ABSTRACT

Eco-dystopia or Eco-critical dystopia focuses on the environmental ruin and how that brings subsequent changes to the society. Eco-dystopia tells the stories of apocalypse, dilapidated earth, earth's rebel against human exploitation and human adversity due to the loss of natural resources. These echo the environmental concerns that need to be addressed properly. Eco- dystopian novels articulate the near future crisis that stress much importance on the environmental disaster caused by human intervention. Dystopian novels in general speculate a society packed with dystopian elements such as technological control, religious control, loss of individuality, survival as well as environmental havoc. Major issues of climate change have been described in many dystopian novels throughout the years. For instance, Parable of the Sower, Tentacle, American war, The Fifth Season and so on predict the future, where global warming and pollution have led to the eradication of society. Extreme weather, food shortage, rising sea levels, high pollution, climate change have become the core of these novels.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Eco-dystopia or Eco-critical dystopia focuses on the environmental ruin and how that brings subsequent changes to the society. Eco-dystopia tells the stories of apocalypse, dilapidated earth, earth's rebel against human exploitation and human adversity due to the loss of natural resources. These echo the environmental concerns that need to be addressed properly. Eco- dystopian novels articulate the near future crisis that stress much importance on the environmental disaster caused by human intervention. Dystopian novels in general speculate a society packed with dystopian elements such as technological control, religious control, loss of individuality, survival as well as environmental havoc. Major issues of climate change have been described in many dystopian novels throughout the years. For instance, Parable of the Sower, Tentacle, American war, The Fifth Season and so on predict the future, where global warming and pollution have led to the eradication of society. Extreme weather, food shortage, rising sea levels, high pollution, climate change have become the core of these novels.

There is no distinction between the real world and dystopian world as of the present age. The sudden urge to produce dystopian movies and novels reflects how past centuries were affected by the dystopian situation they encountered. The most eerily prophetic work, The Road by Cormac McCarthy talks about the savage environment where the world is shrunk into nothingness with an unspecified disaster. It portrays a land which was completely devastated and the landscape is "Barren, silent, godless" (2) which becomes the most representative novel of ecological concerns. This paper aims to trace the rhetoric of ecoprecarity represented in this novel.

*The Road* talks about unnamed father and a son, who in an apocalyptic world strive to seek an alternate mode of life. "We're the walking dead in a horror film" (57). It also highlights the precarious state of environment which makes humans vulnerable to survive. This precariousness of ecosystem is caused by the human intervention, which in turn makes the earth uninhabitable. "Ecoprecarity is at once about the precarious lives humans lead in the event of ecological disaster and also about the environment itself which is rendered precarious due to human intervention in the Anthropocene." (Nayar 7)

The discourse of ecoprecarity states Pramod K Nayar, defines the vulnerability of humans when exposed to drastic disaster and calamities. These discourses are most represented in eco- dystopic novels to highlight the necessity of the awareness regarding the sustainability of Nature. The Love of a father towards his son and his will to protect his son in a post-apocalyptic world becomes the plot of this novel. In this post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road*, the image of burned land, ash and dust are the major things to be found everywhere. While reading this novel, people are terrified not because of the dreary future but its familiarity in the presence. The issue of devastation of earth highlighted in this novel shows how humans tend to damage the environment rather than maintaining and balancing it. Though dystopia talks about the imagined future it is advisable to note that they are talking about the actual dangers that are about to take place.

These environmental disasters don't happen all of the sudden or with one singular event; rather, they are gradually accumulated through numerous reasons which in turn bring ruthless disaster to the world. This statement adheres to Rob Nixon's idea of environmental degradation as 'slow violence'. According to Rob Nixon, "By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Burning fossil fuels, deforestation are the human intervention on earth over a period of time and space and in return the climate change, ocean acidification, eutrophication and epidemic are the environmental catastrophes that are slowly unfolding among the human lives. These environmental catastrophe are the slow violence which is a major threat multiplier that makes earth uninhabitable.

*The Road* projects a grueling journey of a father and his little boy across the city blasted by cataclysm that has destroyed almost all life on the earth. Throughout their journey, the survival becomes the heart of this novel. When civilization collapses, the behavior of the people changes drastically that they commit brutal action in order to survive. That includes theft, killing, rape, cannibalism and so on. *The Road* is filled with such kind of barbaric background as nature is entirely annihilated by an unspecified catastrophe. This disaster that ravages the human population completely collapsed the society. "There is no later. This is later" (56). There is no food, water and electricity. The sickening world where the cities are burned to ashes and people resorted to cannibalism just to survive.

When most of the population is devastated, the remaining people in order to survive, formed a group who indulge in killing, enslaving and cannibalism. Here the father and son, in order not to become savage, restrain themselves from killing or eating human flesh. It highlights the precarious lives of the unnamed father and his son in this threatening environment where humans tend to eat human flesh for survival. People are not ready to accept their faults nor do they acknowledge the terrible things they done to mother earth. Only after destruction says McCarthy, "Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counter spectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence" (293). Ultimately, after the apocalypse, people could only sense the silence and the deadliness they committed to mother earth.

These elements portray that the human precariousness is caused by three factors. That is by the environment, by the fellow beings and by their own bodies. The precariousness represented in the novel is caused by the environment as it is barren, "No signs of life anywhere. It was no country that he knew" (216) and by a fellow being, where the people have turned towards cannibalistic attitude. "The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" (192) and finally by their own bodies, through starvation and malnutrition. "He looked like something out of a death camp. Starved, exhausted, sick with fear" (123). Freud in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* mentions that humans are prone to suffering and discontent that comes from three sides:

'We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men.' (Freud, 264)

According to Freud, the suffering is caused by civilization. Humans progress towards technological invention which made civilization possible at the cost of inviting displeasure. In *The Road*, though civilization is entirely wiped out by human action, their maintaining of civilization as well brings agony and discontentment. The three threatening factors which

lead to human vulnerability make a clear statement that all these precariousness happened because the ecology as well as ecosystem were disturbed and destroyed. The father and the son are deprived of nutrition because nature is annihilated and the landscape threatens their survival as nature is destroyed by human violence. Then, the relation to other human beings becomes horrible as there is no hope to survive in this crumbled nature-less situation where one human preys another. When there is no food left, they become too feeble and miserable. There is no strength left in them and the journey becomes an arduous task when the father's cough doesn't stop. Here their own bodies become vulnerable which leads to their suffering. Thus the man's root cause of suffering is when he is not aware that without nature he is nothing. This novel best exemplifies Freud's statement and this kind of analysis is to juxtapose the endless suffering of humans when nature is destroyed and so much concerned with the environmental precariousness that makes humans vulnerable.

In the name of civilization, human's attitude towards nature becomes hideous. Humans consciously destroy nature with their crazy inventions. The landscape mentioned in the road shows the symptoms of nuclear holocaust. Everywhere there is a "soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop" (2). The people are seen in biohazard suits with masks and goggles which indicates the destruction might be caused by the nuclear holocaust. The Road provoked a huge response that shaped the politics of ecological debate. Here, McCarthy's understanding of human relationship to nature is not complex. He portrays the end of the world brought by humans where humans are not immune to the destruction they caused. They suffer terrible suffering in order to survive the damage they inflicted upon themselves. "Every day is a lie, he said. But you are dying. That is not a lie" (254). Thus this novel calls for eco-political action by rendering the rhetoric of ecoprecarity.

The geography presented in The Road is dangerous with concurrent earthquakes, thunder, lightning, snow fall as well as forest fires characterizing the subsequent changes that are happening in the real world. It also indicates the slow violence that has the capacity to put an end to the world. Unending forest fires led to the fall of each tree crashing with a loud thud. Environmental discourses in this novel include "City stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the wasted" (7), "Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory" (17), "The mummied dead everywhere" (23), "By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (32), "The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities" (93), "He looked at the sky out of old habit but there was nothing to see" (109), "He stood there thinking about cows and he realized they were extinct" (127), "The country was looted, ransacked, ravaged. Rifled of every crumb" (136). These rhetoric on eco disaster highlights the precariousness of Nature and the vulnerability of humans towards it. These discourses are meant to enlighten people to take desired action towards the precariousness.

The Road is a paradigm that highlights the compassion of a father towards his son in a post- apocalyptic land. Even in the dire situation of starvation and existential crisis it's surprising to note that the father wants to keep the fire inside them alive. "Nothing bad is going to happen to us.... Because we're carrying the fire" (87). They try harder not to fall for the prey of destruction and maintain themselves to be one of the good guys. When man loses everything, his last hope is nature but when nature is devastated and ransacked to the point that it could not be retrieved, then the possibility of staying good guys is unimaginable. Yet this story highlights the consistency of father and son who don't want to turn savage. "That the boy was all that stood between him and death" (29). In The Road, the compassion of Father towards his son is juxtaposed with the grotesque landscape of America to create empathy from the readers supposing to take appropriate action towards the environmental havoc.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None

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