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Hope and Crisis in McCarthy's *The Road* and Mandel's *Station Eleven*

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Abstract

*Presentation of the duality of hope and crisis for eco-conscious is the main feature of post-apocalyptic fictions. This research work comparatively analyzes the revelation of hope and crisis in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* from ecocritical perspective. These fictional works expose extreme destruction of life, property and even the natural world. Human beings interfere in the course of nature, by violating the web of interdependence between plants and animals and neglecting its autonomous existence. These novels reveal the germination of the different types of apocalypses because of such invasion, which ultimately push our ecosphere in danger. Such displays of the dystopian worlds are purposeful. They aim to strike the thoughts of people and make them serious towards ecological issues. They give the sense of imminent environmental peril to correct their misdeeds. At the same time, such fictional works also include events and situations that signal optimism in the readers. The comparative study reveals that the key point of the post-apocalyptic fictions is to present the dialectics of hope and hopelessness for the eco-conscious in readers and make them ecofriendly. This paper follows qualitative research design focusing on the textual analysis method for the analysis of the primary texts to justify the claim. Critical ideas of Lawrence Buell in relation to the environmental apocalypse are used as analytical tools for critical analysis.*

Keywords: Apocalypse, eco-consciousness, environmental peril, interference, symbiotic relation

Introduction

Dealing with the dystopian events, post-apocalyptic fictions expose the threat to the whole of humanity in the endangered situation. It is indicated through mass robbery,

mass murder, extreme natural disaster, pandemic killing large population etc. They are the outcome of human negligence to the wellness of our ecosphere. Even in such a gloomy atmosphere, the writers shed the light of hope and create optimism through certain events and situations. This research work aims to examine critically and analyze such issues in comparative ways in *The Road* and *Station Eleven* from ecocritical perspective. As post-apocalyptic fictions, both novels deal with severe crises leading human civilization to the verge of extinction. In spite of the gloomy setting of the novels, certain signals are there to indicate positive possibilities. Following qualitative research design, it uses textual analysis method, using data from both primary and secondary sources. This study uses ecocriticism as a basic theoretical perspective with special focus to the environmental apocalypse trend using the theoretical insight of Lawrence Buell in relation to the different modes that can subvert environmental apocalypse.

Literature Review

This study incorporates *The Road* and *Station Eleven* as primary texts for the study. Both novels have elicited positive responses of critics resulting in multiple interpretations. In “The End of The Road: Pastoralism and Post-Apocalyptic Wasteland of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*” Tim Edward highlights the issue of dead landscapes because of the catastrophe. He focuses on the critical condition of natural components, “The landscape itself is largely mute, darkened, clouded, its color palette stripped of beauty and diversity and reduced to variations of gray” (56). He shows the way the novel addresses the issue of survival not only of humankind, but also of life as a whole. The landscape is blasted not by natural violence but by human violence. The beauty of nature has gone with the collapse of diversity caused by the calamity. This research keeps in mind the chaotic aspect of the novel but exactly focuses on the events and situations that signal the possibility of regeneration and future life.

Glenna M. Andrade in “The Road to Post Apocalyptic Fiction: Mc Carthy’s Challenges to Post- Apocalyptic Genre” stands against the hopeful ending of the novel, “*The Road* is more than a simple quest for safe home. It challenges the boundaries of typical Post Apocalypse novel and complicates the usual, hopeful ending” (2). The writer claims uncertainty as the whole atmosphere is inappropriate for life and survival is questionable. Disagreeing with him, this study claims the hopeful end of the novel with the view that the struggling spirit of human beings is sure to survive and continue. Highlighting the positive aspect of the novel indicating the possibility after the apocalypse Ashley Kunsu writes, “*The Road* is not tabula rasa, not a re- imagination from scratch; it takes what remains after the world has been destroyed and goes forward from there in search of what is next” (69). His focus is the future that the novel indicates. This research agrees with him and further elaborates the optimistic future for continuity of human civilization.

The success of the novel *Station Eleven* to evoke both terror and empathy is discussed by Tiffany Gilbert in her book review. She praises, “Mandel displays the impressive skill of evoking both terror and empathy which I credit to her background as mystery author” (1). This is the quality of post-apocalyptic fiction. In the novel, there are many events and situations that generate both terror and empathy. Similarly, Megan Hunter compliments the novel with the issue of advocating the value of art in the time of crisis in her essay “Seeing the Hopeful Side of Post-Apocalyptic Fiction”. The world population is near the end but the performers and singers are continuing their works to make the remaining world better. Highlighting the value of art she mentions, “In *Station Eleven* the plague reveals a world that still, despite its collapse, holds on to the importance of arts”(2). Hunter is concerned to show the value of art in critical situations. This study agrees with him and explores more about the value of art to regenerate spirit of hope in critical moments.

In “Negative Strategies and World Disruption in Post-apocalyptic Fiction” Marco Caracciolo argues that *Station Eleven* presents both worlds: pre- and post- apocalyptic to create eagerness for the pre-apocalyptic world. He focuses to the negative strategies followed by the writer in his interpretation, “The narrator’s insistence on the monochromic landscape is the main route through which negation operates in the novel: while *Station Eleven* focuses on the denial of objects, technologies, and practices of pre-world” (231). Showing the absence of technological advancement of the pre-apocalyptic world the writer creates longing for that world. This research does not limit to the negative strategies for positive results, moreover explores the hidden positive aspects that generate hope in the readers.

Diletta De Cristofaro’s “Temporalities: *Station Eleven* and Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel” discusses the challenge that the novel poses to apocalyptic tradition, western modernity and its metanarratives. He states, “*Station Eleven* self- reflexively emphasizes this difference between traditional and contemporary apocalyptic imagination.”(4). Cristofaro’s focus is to depict how contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions like *Station Eleven* are different to theological tradition. Recent post-apocalyptic fictions are more contemporary problem oriented. This research agrees with him regarding his view of recent post-apocalyptic fiction and their contemporary problem orientation. He adds:

Station Eleven’s plot itself consists of fragments from before and after the apocalypse, which challenges the teleological linearity of apocalyptic temporality. The narrative continuously moves between the pre and the post-apocalypse without any regular pattern, and, what is more, even in these two distinct periods, the narrative keeps shifting between different time, from the night Arthur dies and the pandemic begins, to various moments in his life and that of people that are

connected to him, from the catastrophe's immediate aftermath, to fifteen and twenty years after it. (21)

Taking the reference of the plot and narrative, Cristofaro analyses the issue of challenging the linearity of traditional apocalyptic fiction and apocalyptic temporality. Fragmented narrative and excessive time shifting make it different. Concentrating less to the aspect of challenging traditional temporality this research focuses on the effort of such fictions in generating optimism in readers.

This literature review clarifies that these two fictional works *The Road* and *Station Eleven* are studied from different perspectives. To the best of my knowledge, no research work has analyzed the fictionalized dialectics of hope and hopelessness in these novels in a comparative way. This is the research gap the study aims to fulfil.

Methods and Materials

This research work as qualitative research focuses library study and uses data from both primary and secondary sources. Selected primary texts *The Road* and *Station Eleven* are primary data under scrutiny. These texts are analyzed applying the theoretical lens of the established principle of ecocriticism. These insights are the theoretical parameters to examine, analyze and interpret the primary texts. Secondary data obtained from other related books, academic journals and internet sources are also used here. This study uses ecocriticism as a basic theoretical perspective with special focus on the theoretical insight of the environmental apocalypse trend led by Lawrence Buell.

Environmental Apocalypticism: A Theoretical Modality

The expansion of ecocritical movement worldwide has given birth to different trends in it. Arcadian discourse, ecosystem discourse, environmental justice discourse, toxic discourse, animal studies, eco feminism, eco Marxism, eco theology, deep ecology and environmental apocalypse are some of them. This research uses the ideas related to the trend of environmental apocalypse that generally denotes a future scenario involving global collapse of human civilization and potential human extinction as either direct or indirect result of anthropocentric climate change or other causes.

Lawrence Buell, the leading thinker of the environmental apocalypse trend, presents the literary vision of environmental catastrophe in his essay, "Environmental Apocalypticism". Among the master metaphors he relates to the whole order of nature, the metaphor of the web is very crucial to talk about the interdependence of plants and animals. "Plants and animals are after all bound together; bodies and the world are caught in a network of dependence" (283). To prophesy the unintended consequences of human interventions with nature and its world-wide disaster, Buell brings the reference of the two writers who have used web metaphor. He claims that Rachael Carson in the *Silent Spring* and Leslie Marmon Silko in *Ceremony* present the disaster caused by the introduction of

DDT in the food chain and release of atomic energy of uranium in bombs that collapsed the whole web of life.

Defining 'apocalypse' as a master metaphor that is haunting environmentalists, Buell states, "Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (285). This metaphor has become an important part of modern fiction. Though critics like Jem Bendell argue that environmental apocalypse never happens, it is still significant to warn people. Indicating the purpose of apocalyptic literature Buell argues, "We create an image of doom to avert doom" (295). It means apocalyptic literature creates dystopian events to avert such events compelling people to think seriously.

Buell differentiates religious apocalypse and modern apocalypse in the sense of their motives and shows the way both hope and despair play equally important roles in secular apocalypse. He asserts, "For secular apocalypse than the world has ever seen aggravates traditional oscillations between hope and despair" (299). The interplay of hope and hopelessness is better in secular apocalypse than in traditional apocalypse. Indicating the nuclear holocaust as the source of modern apocalypse Buell writes, "The possibility of total destruction is enough to sustain a high level of vehemence; the moral absurdity of it actually happening is enough to prove skepticism toward apocalyptic discourse" (299). The danger of total destruction of human civilization by nuclear bombs brought apocalyptic discourse in light. The fear of unknown future and possible disaster got expressed in apocalyptic literature. At the same time, the great possibility of ecological catastrophe created "the occasion for environmental apocalyptic expression" (308). The interference of human beings to the web of interdependence and their disastrous outcome created the appropriate context for the expression of environmental apocalypse. Now in different genres of literature, apocalyptic visions find a significant place.

Buell identifies five modes of perceptions that can subvert environmental apocalyptic ends. They are, "Interrelatedness, biotic egalitarianism, magnification, conflation and the sense of imminent environmental peril" (305). Interrelatedness refers to the interdependence between plants and animals, biotic egalitarianism focuses on the equal right and share of the universe to live and work in a hygienic environment and magnification proposes the intrinsic distinct value of every component of the biosphere. Conflation promotes unity between the biotic and abiotic world. Sense of imminent environmental peril is the major purpose of the environmental apocalypse. It is the fear that present misdeeds lead to the horrific future. This sense of peril plays a role in making human behaviors eco-friendly.

Results and Discussion

The novels *The Road* and *Station Eleven* as post-apocalyptic fictions present the world in crisis. The first text presents the dystopia by certain nuclear or natural calamity

leading to environmental crisis and total devastation. The second text exposes the apocalypse by a plague called Georgia flu that kills about ninety percent of the human population and nearly collapses the human civilization. In their exposition of issues like crisis, hope, humanity, art and nature, they resemble in certain aspects and contrast in others. This study undertakes the comparative study of these two narratives concentrating in the interplay of hope and crisis relating to the afore-mentioned issues.

The Road presents two unnamed characters in a world that is nearly destroyed. They are identified as the father and the son and journeying through the desolate landscape for survival. They encounter extreme pain and suffering but never lose hope. Both nature and human beings create threats to their lives. But they manage to reach a beach. Even at the cost of his life the father becomes successful to handle the son to a supportive family that guarantees his journey to new life. Simultaneously, the writer also includes the events that signal positive possibilities. The dystopian events are for making the readers serious towards the issue of ecology whereas the hopeful events are to create the situation of the future possibility.

Similarly, *Station Eleven* exposes the world affected by a pandemic called Georgia Flu. The disease kills a large number of people, limiting human population. Creating the fear of contagion, this highly contagious disease stops human mobility. The scarcity of fuel halts all the basic services and communications. Killing, robbery and many other evil activities become part of life. Machinery things and gadgets of communication become useless and are kept in a museum. After twenty years of the pandemic, gradually people begin to move and live in the post pandemic communities. Human ties ease the sufferings of the pandemic and gradually the possibility of regeneration is seen. The town with electricity is a strong symbol of continuity of human civilization in the post-pandemic world. Both the dystopian and hopeful aspects are for the positive effect on the readers.

In their depiction of the crisis, both the novels are successful to touch the gravity. *The Road* presents the world nearly destroyed in relation to both nature and human civilization. The survivors are a few fungi, some dogs, and some humans turned into cannibals. Its bleakness is unimaginable. The repetitive use of the words and phrases like 'barren, silent, godless, gullied, eroded, cold to crack the stone and take human life' indicate the degraded condition of the natural world. In the same way, phrases like "incinerate corpses shrunk to the size of a child" (Mandel 292), "world largely populated by men who would eat your children" (192), "going to rape us and kill us" (58) expose terror. In addition, the presentation of events like humans trapped for the food of other humans and robbery as normal rules of life indicate the extreme form of crisis. These crises are the outcome of human interference in the web of interdependence. In association with this issue Lawrence Buell states, "Human intervention into the natural system unintentionally makes a point about the unintended consequences" (382). Such

interventions result in different natural calamities that lead to many other critical situations.

On the other hand, the dystopia in *Station Eleven* is terrible but does not meet the extremeness of *The Road*. It presents the human population drastically less in number and devoid of all facilities. Human civilization reaches near end. The expression of Elizabeth, “Are we supposed to believe that civilization has just come to an end” (Mandel 248) exposes the crisis. However, they are surviving in-group helping each other. Natural world is untouched by the pandemic and it is expanding its territory. Human civilization, collapsed by the pandemic, is gradually rebuilding. In “Ask Me Anything.”, explaining the differences between *The Road* and *Station Eleven* in the issue of presenting crisis, Mandel herself writes, “It was important to me to not write that book (*The Road*). I was very deliberate in the timing of the narrative: it’s set mostly fifteen and twenty years after the collapse, not during or the immediate aftermath”. Mandel accepts the influence of Mc Carthy in the act of writing *Station Eleven* and explains her departure. Her focus is the aftermath effect rather than immediate effect. Therefore, she is less horrific in her presentation.

Generation of hope in crisis is the essence of both the novels. However, the presentations of the positive possibilities differ from each other. *The Road* is dominated by crises and positive possibilities are weaker in comparison to *Station Eleven*. Critics like Andrade strongly question the possibility of the continuity of the human race in *The Road*. He claims that the situation is inappropriate for survival. He argues, “This world of an eco-disaster does not exactly permit the hopeful ending” (5). Andrade is doubtful of the regeneration in the world destroyed by eco-disaster. However, our exploration of the novel reveals different events and situations that signal hope. More than others, the resilient spirit of the boy with strong moral conviction, and the supportive family that he gets at the end of the novel strongly indicate positive possibilities. In contrast to this, *Station Eleven* has a strong sense of optimism that challenges the pandemic. The positive role of art, strong human ties, the distant town with electric light and possibility of sailing ship all together create the environment of optimism and regeneration. De Cristofaro highlights its hopeful ending, “and given the positive and optimistic tone of the conclusion, reinforced by the way electricity and lights are repeatedly described as beautiful” (17). The end of the novel is a strong indication of the revival of human civilization.

The ideas presented above show that *The Road* presents dim hope whereas *Station Eleven* is strong to generate hope and expose future possibilities. In both novels, human tendency of suicide also gets place. In *The Road* the mother of the boy sees no hope of the better future and takes suicide as better solution. Her faith in humanity totally fails and pessimism guides her for the act. The overall situation of *Station Eleven* is not as terrific as that of *The Road* but Frank selects the path of suicide to escape from the cruel reality of

the world devastated by the pandemic. These two suicide events are clear indications of two types of people: who struggle enduring pain and suffering, and those who search the way out in escapism or suicide. Those struggling characters dominate the narrative of both novels with a positive message.

Humanity in crisis is another issue explored in both the novels. *The Road* exhibits near death of humanity whereas *Station Eleven* exposes the better survival of it in crisis. Mc Carthy's world is so horrible that faith in humanity is dead. A person needs to be frightened of another person more than anything else. The mother of the son does suicide because of her lost faith on human beings. The surviving human beings are turned into robbers and cannibals. Robbery and killing an individual for food become the general rule of life. The words of the boy's mother express the reality. "Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They will rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us" (Mandel 58). We can imagine no worse situation for humanity than this. Regarding such a crisis, scholars associated with the trend of environmental apocalypse like Buell argue this as the "Projection of the future of a civilization that refuses to transfer itself according to the doctrine of the web" (Buell 285). If human civilization fails to reconcile with the reality of interdependence between the biotic and abiotic world, it will lead to the possibility of extinction. The incident of the trapped people for the food of other people is another incident that exposes the death of humanity in crisis. The humanitarian behavior of the boy, the father and the members of the family met at the end of the novel are exceptional. Through them, the writer signals hope in the novel.

Mandel's world also consists of certain devastations and inhuman behaviors but they are shadowed before the strong human ties. The strong sense of humanity that people maintain in the novel minimizes the crisis of the post-pandemic world. The harmony between and among the members of the travelling symphony and the settlers of the airport community are examples that dominate the fictional world. The people in the Severn City Airport search food together and maintain security guards for protection of the group. "They'd taken to posting guards with whistles, so that they might be warned of a stranger's approach" (Mandel 256). The concept of common security indicates the mutualness of the members. Actually, inhumanity dominates the world of *The Road* whereas strong human ties make the post-pandemic world of *Station Eleven* living worthy.

Different forms of art occupy important places in both *The Road* and *Station Eleven*. They differ in their weightages in the narratives but they are important parts. In both the novels, different forms of art are presented as a medium to decrease the pain and sufferings of dystopian events. In *The Road*, the moral stories have less space in the narrative but they are highly influencing to the main character. They are the true sources of the strong moral behaviors of the boy. Told to entertain the boy and avoid his feeling of

loneliness, they function as shapers of his moral outlook. That is the reason why moral stories are the unavoidable part of the narratives. *Station Eleven* is not only a post-apocalyptic fiction but also a fiction that shows the great value of art in crisis. The issues of performance of the play and music dominate the narrative. It gives meaning to the life of both the performers and the audiences. The comic book *Dr. Eleven* has its own role. It links all the important characters in one way or another. It is the medium to overcome the stress and anxieties of the author and readers. Its role is vital in the novel to generate hope in crisis. Therefore, these novels truly reflect the value of art in critical situations.

Contrastive presentation of nature differentiates Mc Carthy's *The Road* and Mandel's *Station Eleven*. In the first novel nature is unfriendly with its extreme form. The eco-disaster has nearly destroyed the world of plants and animals. "Where all was burnt to ash. ...Cold to crack the stone. To take your life" (McCarthy 13). Barren land, dry trees, burnt forest, snowstorm, extreme cold and ash-covered surface are the phrases that expose the reality of the natural world in the novel. It mentions, "All the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later" (13). The characters struggle for survival in such an antagonistic form of nature. Their mission is to reach coastal areas in search of life supporting a warm climate. Overall, nature lacks its charm and beauty and appears in its ravaged form in the novel. In contrast, in the narratives of *Station Eleven* nature gets less space. The pandemic does not affect the natural world but it limits to the human civilization. The novel talks much about human civilization: its collapse and regeneration. However, wherever nature comes, it is in its wilderness. "Just ahead was the overgrown wilderness of a municipal park, a low hill rising beside the road" (Mandel 284). Freed from human encroachment, it extends to human places. The plants also occupy streets and post offices. In the present world where nature is exploited mercilessly, the wilderness of nature has meaning. It shows the need for spontaneity of the natural world untouched by human beings.

Conclusion

Overall, *The Road* and *Station Eleven* are post-apocalyptic fictions that depict certain dystopian events threatening whole human civilization and the earth. They have certain similarities and differences in their presentation of issues like crisis, hope, humanity, art and nature. *The Road* explores the crisis in its unimaginably disastrous form caused by certain nuclear and natural calamity affecting both nature and human beings. Whereas *Station Eleven* presents a crisis caused by a pandemic that affects the human world but not nature. It is not as disastrous as the first one. In the same way, the former novel's hope generating aspect is debatable and weaker but in the later novel, it is clear and stronger. In the first novel inhumanity dominates the human world whereas in the second novel human relationships proves to be the key in surpassing the crisis. Nature is very unfriendly and in nearly destroyed form in the former novel, conversely nature is in

its wilderness in the later novel. However, their shared essence is the exposition of hope in the face of crisis. Their displays of the dystopian events have a motive that is to shock the thought of readers. Lawrence Buell indicates, "We create image of doom to avert doom" (250). Buell is clear about the aim of dystopian events presented in post-apocalyptic fictions. Their purpose is corrective.

In sum up, both writers' intentions of presenting dystopian events aim to avert the eco- disasters by correcting our courses related to ecology. The horrors that they present aim to shock people's thoughts or lead them realize the sense of eminent environmental peril and make them eco-friendly. They warn that our failure to change our behaviors leads human civilization and the natural world to destruction. Our critical scrutiny of these novels exposes that both the novels also contain events and situations in different forms that generate hope in critical time.

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