

“THE MAN” AND “THE BOY” ON THE ROAD: A POSTMODERN READING OF *THE ROAD* BY CORMAC MCCARTHY

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Abstract

American novelist Cormac McCarthy is a contemporary writer with notable works like *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Man* and in particular his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Road* which was published in 2006. The critical reception of *The Road* has often tended to identify the novel as a post-apocalyptic, namely, it depicts a man and a boy in a bleak, desperate, catastrophic atmosphere, in a land deprived of civilization and culture. In addition to building up effects of post-apocalyptic fiction, the novel also has some features that could be attributed to postmodernism. Postmodernism is a late twentieth century movement characterized by skepticism, paradox, paranoia, irony and a general suspicion of reason as post war period makes it hard to allow any single defining source for truth and reality in an already fallen world. Accordingly McCarthy portrays such a world that values like humanity, morality gain paradoxical dimensions. In a desolate world where it is hard to attribute meaning to life itself, the man and the boy's strife to hold on to life through a metaphor of fire and belief in God equals to postmodernism's critical usage of irony in some conventions. Looking through such a perspective, McCarthy's work could be analyzed within the framework of the postmodern textual and stylistic features employed in the novel, exploring the ways in which the writer puts less reliance on traditional narrative form - through narrative strategies such as fragmentation, mingling of the past and present by means of recollected memories and dreams - and in doing so, raises questions on the issue of truth and existence in a dead world engulfed by constant state of paranoia and suspicion.

Keywords: postmodern, Cormac McCarthy, The Road, post-apocalyptic, skepticism, reality

YOLDA ‘BİR ADAM’ VE ‘BİR ÇOCUK’: CORMAC MCCARTHY’NİN YOL ROMANINA POSTMODERN BİR BAKIŞ

Özet

Amerikalı yazar Cormac McCarthy 2006 yılında Pulitzer Ödülü kazanan romanı *Yol (The Road)* başta olmak üzere *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses* ve *No Country for Old Man* gibi çalışmalarını ile

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adından söz ettirmiş çağdaş yazarlardandır. *Yol*, özellikle karanlık, kaotik, adeta felaket sonrası andıran, kültür ve medeniyetten soyutlanmış bir atmosferde ‘bir adam’ ve ‘bir çocuk’ merkezli hikâyesi ile daha çok kıyamet sonrası romanı olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Ancak roman, post modern açıdan incelenebilecek özelliklere de sahiptir. Post modernizm yirminci yüzyılın ikinci yarısında ortaya çıkan ve savaş sonrası dönemde zaten düşmüş bir dünyada daha çok şüphe, çelişki, ironi ve gerçeğin göreceliliği ile şekillenen bir akımdır. Buna uygun olarak McCarthy’nin betimlediği dünyada da insanlık ve ahlak gibi değerler çelişkili bir boyut kazanmıştır. Adeta çöle dönmüş bir dünyada, yaşamın kendisine anlam yüklemenin zorlaştığı bir ortamda hala Tanrı’ya inanıp, içlerinde taşıdıklarına inandıkları ateş metaforu ile hayata tutunmaya çalışmaları, post modernizmin ironi olgusuna eleştirel bakışına eş değerdir. McCarthy’nin şimdiki ve geçmiş zamanı kimi zaman birbirine geçirerek anlatıda gelenekselin dışına çıkıp parçalı bir aktarım ile paranoya ve şüphenin hâkim olduğu bir dünyada gerçeklik ve varoluş öğelerini sorgular hale getirmesi, gerek metinsel gerek biçimsel olarak romana farklı bir pencereden bakma imkanı vererek romanın post modern edebiyat içinde değerlendirilmesine olanak sağlayabilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: post modern, Cormac McCarthy, *Yol*, kıyamet sonrası, şüphecilik, gerçeklik

American novelist Cormac McCarthy's literary canon includes various genres like crime thriller (*No Country for Old Men*) and western novels (*The Border Trilogy*). His 2006 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Road* is generally evaluated in post-apocalyptic fiction. If not all, a great majority of McCarthy's novels explore human violence and people on the fringe. The bleakest one, however, might very well be *The Road* since the disaster that led to this post-apocalyptic world, where two unnamed characters struggle to stay alive is not clarified. McCarthy depicts such a world that the category of the novel could also be extended to postmodern as in fallen world, 'the man' and 'the boy's road is marked by a reliance on recollected dreams and memories, questionings of certain values like life and existence itself, a sense of fear and paranoia and a suspicion of reality and reason.

Man, who has always been identified with "reason", has the potential to be the bearer of unreasonable, destructive outcomes due to unreasonable causes. This sudden shift brought about by wars has not only shaken the absolute faith in man but also in God, religion, life or the existence itself. This new attitude made itself evident in every step of life and literature was just one of the art forms that took its share. After wars or any experience that invokes apocalypse, the writers might have felt an urge to put those to pen. The changes that occurred throughout Western literature following two big world wars have also shaped the dominant forces of literature of what we know as modernism and postmodernism.

Postmodern literature is a type of literature that came to prominence after World War II. While modernist literary tradition generally follows a path of depicting a world on the edge of disaster, postmodernism seeks a new way of highlighting the fact that the world has already undergone many disasters and it is now beyond redemption or understanding. The notion of locating exact meanings behind any event looks impossible more than ever. Such disasters that occurred in the second half of 20th century could have left some writers with a sense of paranoia or conspiracy theories which have become increasingly common especially in the post war period. Timothy Melley in his work *Empire of Conspiracy and the Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* observes that a kind of paranoia has settled over many communities and many social groups depend on conspiracy theory for their survival. Melley makes further comments that such theory has been a fundamental organizing principle in American film, television and fiction since World War II (7). From that point of view, any apparent connections or controlling influences on the chaos of society would be very frightening, and this lends a sense of paranoia to many postmodern works. Not surprisingly it could be said that at the core of a postmodern writing lies a belief that the world has already fallen and literature could serve to reveal its paradoxes and ironies. Many postmodern authors write under the assumption that modern society cannot be explained or understood.

It could be said that a shift has originated in the way humanity and denouement of the world is viewed with global wars leading to countless deaths and ensuing failed policies. Therefore, it is not a

coincidence that the birth of postmodernism meets the post war period that the whole world had to endure. Most postmodernist futures, in other words, are grim dystopias (McHale 67). Furthermore, Brian McHale in his book *Postmodernist Fiction* dramatizes this shift from an epistemological to an ontological one, namely, the dominant force of postmodern fiction is ontological as it raises the questions: “Which world is this?” and “What is to be done in it?” (10) The first and the general impression of McCarthy’s novel is also concerned with such self-questionings given that the man and the boy live in a world where it is hardly livable and more like a post-war scene.

The Road is generally categorized as a post-apocalyptic novel and it fits into the genre particularly because of its subject matter and the setting given that the action takes place after destruction and two human beings try to adjust to an “environment from which all the usual markers-geographical, temporal, and social- have been erased” (Lagayette 89). However, those features also bear basic resemblances to hold the view that they also contribute to being canonized in postmodernism. From the beginning to the end, the novel has a grim atmosphere. It is even likened to “a sort of tabula rasa-a landscape erased of many of its previously defining features” (Edwards 57). McCarthy makes it very clear even in the first page: “Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before” (1). It is consolidated in the further pages that there is no sign of life and the two main characters have to survive in such a “barren, silent, godless” (2) land where there is no sense of time. However this new world is also violent and inhospitable since the people left are portrayed as savages. It could be argued that McCarthy attempts to criticize human beings’ tendency to destroy the planet with reckless abandon. David Kushner in his review in *Rolling Stones*, draws attention to the fact that McCarthy has an admittedly pessimistic worldview, seeing human life on the planet temporary, and hence developing “what if” scenarios while grounding his fiction in a greater reality. Accordingly, the novel might be expected to display a manner or tendency of an unlikely fantasy world, however, despite its full-blooded ambiguity, *The Road* gives a realistic account as to what such a world would be like with a great sense of accomplishment in helping the readers to feel and visualize it.

In the midst of desolation, the two characters in the novel head to the south with the hope of finding warmth, shelter and perhaps bits of civilization or a stable environment. One might question why the characters are going to the ‘south’ which is generally associated with being hotter or sunnier. Chris Walsh’s comments clarify this further: “In the novel’s otherwise utterly dystopian setting, the south not only functions as a physical frontier and goal, but also as an imaginative refuge; quite simply, the father starts to tell, and the son longs to be told, about the south”(53). When all seems to have vanished, besides the motivation that the climate will be better, the father’s childhood memories in which he recalls “a perfect day” fishing with his uncle (52-53) also play a role in determining the south as the ultimate target. Moreover, those memories have pivotal roles in unfolding the fragmented narration and juxtaposition of past and present as a result of it.

Throughout the novel it is not hard to grasp that the narration is not in the traditional sense. In that respect, it even departs from McCarthy's previous works like *Blood Meridian* (1985), *The Crossing* (1994) or *No Country for Old Man* (2005) in which the story is told from an omniscient point of view, enabling the reader to figure out the chronology. *The Road* offers a representation of a devastated world in fictional narrative as the novel presents a world that is not so familiar; there is no comprehensible world order. This is highly noted in the dialogues between the man and the boy that are preoccupied with brief, repetitive sentences without a linear sense invoking the idea of fragmentation which is a tool that postmodernism heavily relies on. Whether it is a representation of fiction or an account of history, the book displays an unfamiliar manner in uncovering how the past is known at present. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon explains that in either form, the fragments of the past are made into a discursive whole in postmodernist fiction (59). Accordingly, those fragments of the past find form in the memories of the mother that appear out of the blue in the course of the novel which is another factor contributing to the fragmentation. There is hardly a clear transition from one narration to the other. Although at one point the reader feels carried away with the discourse of the man and the boy, next an irrelevant dialogue with the mother surfaces as part of man's memories, a narrative tendency which McHale comments as follows:

Narrative self-erasure is not the monopoly of postmodernist fiction, of course. It also occurs in modernist narratives, but here it is typically framed as mental anticipations, wishes, or recollections of the characters, rather than left as an irresolvable paradox of the world *outside* the characters' minds (101).

As McHale points out, it is possible to see fragmented narratives in modernism, too. However the existence of recollections of characters in postmodernism is a key distinguishing factor and postmodernist fiction embraces such mental reflections as the dark reality of outside that is far from resolvability. The mentioned "recollected character" in the novel could be the mother. Through the recollected memories of the man, there is a chance to comprehend that the woman or the mother took her own life in order not to experience what was happening "*outside*". In those memories, rather than a domestic scene, all her words evoke her increasing sense of hopelessness and loss of faith therefore she sets out towards her own death without even saying goodbye to her son (59-60).

The fragmented narration which is reminiscent of man's dreams and memories not only help to examine man's inner state of consciousness but also mingles the past and the present. Frederic Jameson opens his book *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, stating: "It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix). That is to say, it is hard to situate

postmodernism without taking into account its relation to the past. In the novel, the past is like a ghost - sometimes in the shape of the mother or bits of glimpses on what might have happened to turn world into such a chaos: “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (54). The historical changes of the past provide a better understanding of the present which is the case in the novel, too. Although it is never made clear how and why it happened, the readers are fully aware that the natural world is dead or shattered by an unknown catastrophe of the past. However at present, its reflections are versatile and keep lingering as the houses are abandoned, cities are empty. With heaps of grey dust in the air, the sun is apparently absent and there is cold rain almost every night. Reminding of a post-war scene, there is no plant or animal life but hunger, constant hiding and fear of death. Rather than giving details on how and why the world turned into such an uninhabitable planet, McCarthy focuses on the outcomes of it particularly on two people representing the whole humankind as their names suggest: “the man” and “the boy”. Eric Hage elaborates on this by saying: “McCarthy doesn’t meditate on the cause of the devastation and reduces the scope of the novel to this insular tale of survival, this world between a father and son who are never named.” (141). The two main characters who are harassed by threats of murder and starvation throughout the novel assume universal roles as reflected in their names. As the representatives of the bleak reality they are living in, the father or the man can be identified with the past as he is the one who has witnessed how the world turned into what it is; whereas the boy becomes the tool for hope with the “fire he is carrying in” (87) in a potential future. In that “posthumous condition of nature and civilization” (Kennedy), the boy, with his child-like innocence and state of already being born into such a world might possess an advantage, as he is unaware of some emotions that are familiar to human beings. Regarding the symbolic significance of the characters, William Kennedy in his review on *New York Times* states that “it is through the voice of the father that McCarthy delivers his vision of end times. The son, born after the sky opened, has no memory of the world that was.” For instance; when the man and the boy find a town, the father leaves his son to search for the area. At that point, the son sees another boy, and he immediately wants to help him. However, the man is very reluctant and insists that they should leave (88-89). In a way; the father’s full awareness embodies a blockage in his approach towards other people - since in an utter atmosphere of independence, they only have each other, yet barbarity is a danger awaiting them on that unsafe road, a situation which carries parallelism with the way postmodernism questions the nature of freedom.

The notion of freedom has been subjected to suspicion in postmodernist criticism since the idea of man endowed with full freedom might also be coupled with repression, abuse or murder. Brian McHale points out that “postmodernist condition is an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural” (37). At first glance, the plurality recalls multiplicity in every field of life, particularly in terms of intellectuality. However, such an absolute freedom also causes such a void that it might beget limitless cruelties or inhuman activities which can be trailed in the murder, theft and cannibalism that are

portrayed or implicated in the novel. Thus the world is now populated by different kind of people with different and complex ontological views. In one case, the man and the boy barely escape from a group of such people. After days without food and sleep, they come across a large house and the man has an immediate urge to search for the house. Yet, it soon becomes clear that it is a trap house as they find a room in which naked people are huddled against the back wall, “male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands” (116) probably to make food for the cannibals. The world of *The Road* is a lawless one, through which stalk bands of thieves, murderers and cannibals, all intent on maintaining their own essentially futile existences at the expense of the weak and vulnerable (Gullivan 99). The anarchy surrounding them does not only stem from the fact that the world is stripped of its basic needs like food, shelter and warmth, but also from the ideas concerning how survival instincts reign and lead to even more destructive outcomes.

Equally significant is the fact that anarchy repositions man in such a world. At this point Ihab Hassan’s comments might be useful: “Yet it is already possible to note that whereas modernism created its own forms of authority, precisely because the center no longer held, postmodernism has tended toward anarchy, in deeper complicity with things falling apart” (29). Literally speaking, things have definitely fallen apart in the world portrayed by McCarthy. In such a denaturalized planet, man has no place or in other words, finds himself decentered. There is no exact form of authority but with complex plural ontological views, the people have a tendency to act on their own more than ever. The father and the boy might have each other, however the fear of death also accompanies them on the road. Therefore, staying strong and cool as much as possible is vital for their survival. While the man tries to accomplish that by thinking that he has to protect the child no matter what, the boy supplies his father with mental sanity so that they can move on. Nonetheless, the man with all his doubts and fears inevitably initiates an act of questionings particularly pertaining to reality.

Reality and the relative condition of it have a solid place in postmodernism. According to Christopher Butler, the postmodernist novel does not try to create a sustained realist illusion (73). Devoid of a linear thinking, human perception of certain things alters so does the function of reality. On the other hand, in her article “Can the Apocalypse be Post?” Teresa Heffernan notes that in such stories centering the end of the world, “the real has imploded and the subject has disappeared” (171). As for Linda Hutcheon, while bringing her version of postmodernism she also puts an important emphasis on the issue of truth as follows: “The standard negative evaluation of postmodernism asserts that it is without an ordered and coherent vision of truth” (38). In the novel, the relativity of truth is encapsulated by the blurred line drawn by the writer on the issue of goodness in such a chaotic world as the new order demands doing anything indiscriminately for the sake of survival even if it means breaking away with certain merits of society. For the man in the novel, they are “still the good guys” (81) as long as they do not eat man like those bad guys so that they can keep their morality. This prompts the question: what matters to be good in a world where only survival instincts reign? When

placed in such a world, it could be argued that there is nothing to live for which paves the way for the loss of an objective approach to truth. What is certain is that the reality has turned into a more complex or relative matter as no matter how devastating the outcomes are, human beings have a tendency to accommodate themselves to varied conditions bringing into minds Stanley James Grenz's "community-based" approach to truth in postmodernism:

The postmodernist worldview operates with a community-based understanding of truth. It affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate [...] the postmodern worldview affirms that this relativity extends beyond our perceptions of truth to its essence: there is no absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to the community in which we participate [...] On the basis of this assumption, postmodern thinkers have given up Enlightenment quest for any one universal, supracultural, timeless truth. They focus instead on what is held to be true within a specific community (8).

Grenz puts an important emphasis on how community is crucial in determining the truth. One might argue that there is hardly a community to live with in McCarthy's *The Road*. However, there are certain groups of people who somehow make a living even if it is on their own terms as it is the case for the man and the boy. The truth is no longer under the scrutiny of reason but it is based on a more arbitrary nature. Hence associating goodness or badness simply with morality would be awkward for such a world given the factor of self-defense in the community they have to participate in.

On the other hand, in the *Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, the best way of describing postmodernism as a philosophical movement is explained as "skepticism" (Lewis 6). Lewis claims that: "Paranoia, or the threat of total engulfment by somebody else's system, is keenly felt by many of the dramatis personae of postmodernist fiction" (129). In the novel the man and the boy do not have to worry about cultural or political norm or a certain kind of authority, government or state but there is definitely a new order or system that poses a threat to everyone who is alive and it requires being merciless. They cannot even take a chance on meeting with other people, since in a world where men are reduced to wild animals, it is hard to feel secure, and trust people. The man cannot even expand his world beyond the child because he has lost his capacity to count on people. For the man, the only thing that is lashing him to this barely livable world is his son, and thus he inflicts on himself the missionary task of protecting his son, as he tells the boy: "I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (77). However, the boy, who was born around the time of the apocalypse and knows no other world, has an overwhelming sensitivity whatever he encounters, and he is more prone to reach out the other people. From the boy he catches a glimpse of a boy at a deserted town at the

beginning of the novel to the old wretched man they come across towards the end of the novel; he has a compassion that can be found only in a pure, innocent child. This could also be linked to the fact that with the fire he is carrying, he assumes the role of future. Therefore, what is expected from such a divine being is to remain as much good and dignified as possible.

In the aftermath of apocalypse, in order to make living worthy the father has an extra effort to remain dignified by not attacking, stealing or eating other people, and that is what he teaches to the boy. This cannot be a coincidence given their mission of carrying the fire which helps them to hold on to life, and believe that civilization can be sustained. According to Randall Willhelm:

Since “culture” has been destroyed in this narrative and belongs to the void in a sense, the father’s replication of the civilizing function of still life seems a strategic attempt to maintain a sense of dignity and a meaningful connection to human history as a means of surviving in this raw new world, where barbarity and the threat of cannibalism continuously loom (132).

Dignity might not exactly equal to what it used to stand for, but Willhelm evaluates its continuation as a strategic attempt taking into account that man needs a meaning to impose on life no matter what. Linda Hutcheon points out that self-consciousness or reliance, however ironic, on tradition is an important aspect of representing postmodernism (27). In line with Hutcheon’s assertion, the man in the novel clutches at some traditions or certain methods so as to find traces of life in a dead world like promising they will be good and uttering the name of God at every opportunity. Interestingly, God still holds a value or virtue for the father; however, this also manifests an ironical situation. Postmodernism generally questions the existence of God and it is possible to find such characters in *The Road*. The mother sees life pointless and in one of the memories the man recalls, she says: “We are the walking dead in a horror film” (57). Her disbelief in everything including God facilitates to give up on life easily unlike the man who has a reason to live - that is the boy. The other character raising questions about God is Ely who is the only character with a name in the novel. The man and the boy encounter that old, battered man towards the end of the novel and their long conversation with him is of importance since he claims that “There is no God and we are his prophets” (181). In the absence of God the idea of prophet sounds irrelevant and meaningless. However, seeing the surviving men as Christ-like figures although their god has left them alone, serves a foreshadowing element for the end of the novel. The man may not be aspiring to save the world but his son’s well-being has a missionary meaning for him since he values that above all else. On the other hand, the boy progressively adapts to that idea as he claims he is “the one” (277). It could be interpreted that through the wretched man, who is like a physical embodiment of the hopelessness of the world, an insight is developed on why they are existing.

Along with the faith in God, the flame that is believed to be carried by the boy presents an irony. The irony lies in the fact that the father chooses fire as the symbol to represent humanity for the future, however fire, as an element, has the capacity to destroy as well. It can exterminate and lead to new tragedies but also keep one warm and become an inspiration or igniter for survival and new hopes. Furthermore, though the father dies in the end, the boy is soon taken by some people on the shore. Although this is, as in Linda Woodson's words, an "ambiguous hope" (89), considering the whole negative worldview enclosing the novel, McCarthy bestows the reader with an optimistic ending. For Jay Ellis:

The book's ending suggests that even after nuclear winter, or the calamitous climate change sped up by a comet strike, or whatever happens to cover the book with an endless snow of ashes, there remains a distinction between the fires that ravage the hillsides and scorch the road, and the fire carried forward by the father and son (28).

It might be argued that the sudden arrival of the family stages a breakaway from the horror of the book, however with the father's death the boy enters a new phase and has a "fighting chance" (Kunsa 67). Yet, when the book ends, one cannot help questioning whether life will renew itself or the family, taking the boy, is really 'good'? Will they provide him with shelter, survival, even restoration of his late mother or just see the boy as potential bait?

In conclusion, *The Road* characterizes the journey of two people for survival in a world destroyed probably at the hands of humans themselves. Representing the whole humanity without particular names, the man and the boy advance on a road that stages traces of postmodernist fiction. McCarthy builds such a world of despair and sorrow that his outlook on the world also seems depressing which is in conformity with postmodernism's replacing optimism with an incisive pessimism. By means of the memories of the dead mother that intervene in-between, a bridge is established between the past and the present, a situation which, functions on the one hand as a way of fracturing the narration, and on the other, giving an insight to the inner world of the man who treasures protecting his son most. While the man and the boy are all alone on their journey to the shores of the south, death becomes a prevalent theme throughout the novel. The way postmodernism considers freedom being equal to anarchy draws an analogy with the fact that they have to avoid people for fear of violence or cannibalism. In addition, postmodernism rejects the idea of truth depending on pure rationality and gives a chance to analyze that human mind is manipulative, and it can yield to totalizing ideologies. Likewise, in the novel, some key concepts like humanity, morality, savagery, and face-off goodness and evil are imposed contradictory visions on the verge of extinction. The post-disaster condition is so dreadful that the crisis of existence, meaning and reality gain new dimensions

in a world where living is worthless for some and for others it means cost of lives. With a feeling of insecurity and skepticism, they keep clutching on to life not solely through search of food and sanctuary but also to remain 'human'. In doing so, the way they keep their belief in God in an empty, grim world and choosing 'fire' as a metaphor for a hopeful future demonstrates implications of irony which is a tool postmodernism often turns to. After all, McCarthy's characters still find a way of holding on to life and maintaining hope, not just simply to live but to sustain civilization for future. Therefore, *The Road* deservedly takes place in a post-apocalyptic context yet the term 'postmodernist' can also be applied to it.

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