



The Struggle to Stay Alive: A Comparative Study of the Survival Strategies in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

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Abstract— *Survival is a prominent theme in the genre of post-apocalyptic literature. Such narrative unravels in the aftermath of a catastrophic event, where civilization has crumbled, leaving behind a desolate world. Its central theme revolves around survival - the instinctual drive of characters to stay alive amidst chaos, scarcity, and danger. These narratives explore the resilience of humanity, the loss of societal norms, and the pursuit of hope in dire circumstances. The strategy of survival is different for each survivor of every story - ranging from combating the outbreak of a deadly virus to coping with a world ending natural disaster. The novels of Cormac McCarthy, a prominent figure in modern American Fiction, tell the tale of a struggle for human survival. The novels of Emily St John Mandel also depict realistic scenarios where survival of humans is threatened. This paper intends to analyse the various survival strategies adopted by the characters of the selected post-apocalyptic fiction by the above mentioned authors in order to tackle the life threatening circumstances they are presented with.*



Keywords— *Post-apocalypse, survival strategies, survival.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, even to live is an act of courage - Seneca

The literal meaning of the word “apocalypse” is “an event resulting in great destruction and violent change” (“Apocalypse”, def. 1). The genre of post-apocalyptic literature, as its name suggests, is set in a world that has been obliterated by a large-scale disaster or an ‘apocalypse’. Its beginnings may be traced back to the nineteenth century with the publication of *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley but its popularity has gained momentum in the past few decades. This rise in popularity was seen after the various wars of the twentieth century, the two World Wars in particular. The other events that might have triggered the post-apocalyptic imagination are nuclear proliferation, outbreak of various pandemics, and hostility among various nations. In the introduction of her

book *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: We'll Not Go Home Again* (2010), Curtis agrees with the fact that the post-apocalyptic fiction is becoming more popular in contemporary times and gives the examples of the famous TV show *Jericho* (2006-2008), which was revived due to strong fan support. According to her, the “survivalist” fiction genre is becoming more renowned in contemporary times (Curtis 5). In addition to the soaring popularity of the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, its study is also extremely relevant. According to Sam J Fires, the relevance of this genre sprouts from its ability to offer insight into human behaviour during stressful, even life threatening situations (Fires).

Out of the many themes that are explored in the genre of post-apocalyptic literature, the theme of survival stands out the most. The word ‘survival’ is derived from

the Latin word 'supervivere', which means to outlive. Merriam-Webster defines survival as "the continuation of life or existence" ("survival," N. def. 1.b) and this 'continuation' may also be understood as the saga of the evolution of various species. The aforementioned 'continuation' requires extreme effort from all living creatures including human beings and these efforts to survive increase manifold for an individual dwelling in the post-apocalyptic setting. This story of survival has been explained meticulously by Charles Darwin in his *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, where he states that organisms that cannot adapt to the changing environment remain unsuccessful in transmitting their genes and perish as casualties in the war of nature. Thus the instinct of survival is deeply ingrained in the human mind. This deep rooted instinct of survival is explored in a post-apocalyptic story (Darwin 253-320). This paper aims to study and highlight the discernible strategies of survival in the narratives of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014). In both of these works, the authors vividly present the post-apocalyptic worlds and place their characters in these worlds in such a manner that their story of survival becomes unforgettable.

The Road (2006) by Cormac McCarthy describes the arduous journey of a father and his son to the southern coast after the world has been hit by some unexplained disaster, the aftermath of which has resulted into a dark, ashen and cold surrounding. This disaster has managed to wipe out most of the life on earth, leaving the survivors no other option than to scavenge for food from their surroundings. The father and the son move with their shopping cart laden with essentials such as food, clothing etc. on the road. Their encounters with other people are mostly negative, because the scarcity of resources has made everyone desperate for food and supplies. They finally reach the southern coast battling the challenging environment, cannibal-infested roads and other desperate survivors. The father succumbs to his illness which he has had since a long time but the novel ends on a positive note with another surviving family taking the boy in their refuge.

Station Eleven (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel presents a world where the outbreak of a fast spreading virus named Georgia Flu has wiped out most of the human population. The events that unfold non-chronologically in the novel tell the story of a few survivors who witness this apocalyptic event first hand. These characters seem to have followed different methods of survival which range from living in a close knit community, as is done by Kirsten Raymonde, the protagonist of the novel by joining the Travelling Symphony to isolating oneself during the

peak of the flu as is done by Jeevan Chaudhary, another major character of the novel.

Both of these narratives tell a detailed story of survival and their authors have shed light on survival tactics employed by the characters in different scenarios.

Literary Background

The post-apocalyptic accounts tell the saga of survival in a world which fits the description of a wasteland. These end of the world narratives depict a world where the instinct of self-preservation drives the actions of the characters. The importance of survival in humans and animals is highlighted in the paper titled *The Ecology of Human Fear: Survival Optimization and The Nervous System*, according to which, the relentless pressure to outwit predators while balancing homeostatic threats, such as resource depletion, has produced a nervous system that optimises survival actions (Mobbs D et al. 1). The instinct of survival among the living beings explains the constant modification required for adaptation in the changing environment that has helped in the sustenance of life on earth.

The theme of survival is pretty evident in the post-apocalyptic works such as *Parable of the Sower* (1983) by Octavia E. Butler, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) by Philip K. Dick and *The Bear* (2020) by Andrew Krivak. An elaborate analysis of the theme of survival and its presentation in literature illuminates the ways in which this instinct influences the psychology and actions of people. *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel* (2019) by D. Cristofaro is a seminal work in this regard. It is a conceptual framework that highlights the contemporary obsession with 'the end' by stressing on the importance of time in the 21st-century post-apocalyptic narratives.

II. METHODOLOGY

The present study takes the context of the genre of post-apocalyptic literature and focuses on how survival instinct becomes the driving force for shaping the plot of the novel. The data is collected by a thorough and repeated reading of the selected texts and it deals with narrative textual analysis. The textual evidence is collected from the events that display the actions, thoughts, dialogues of various characters.

Literary Analysis of the Selected Texts: Survival Strategies in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

The instinct for survival can be defined as the inherent capability to act in a manner that ensures one's survival. This instinct fosters adaptation among the living organisms so that the continuation of existence can be

ensured. The survival instincts have a great say on how we act and they also affect our psychology. Since survival is a primal instinct of humans, and it acts as a driving force for the actions of the post-apocalyptic characters, thus shaping the plot of post-apocalyptic fiction. This study attempts to explore various strategies of survival that are adopted by the characters of this genre of literature through the analysis of the selected texts.

Saving one's life in the most difficult times is plainly understood as survival. However surviving in a post-apocalyptic world is not limited to the physical well being of an individual, it extends to the optimum functioning of mental and psychological aspects of one's mind. As the survival instinct is an innate ability, it is just human nature to go to any lengths to ensure their continued sustenance. In order to achieve the required longevity during such times, the characters of post-apocalyptic texts, namely *The Road* and *Station Eleven*, employ a number of survival strategies. These strategies have been discussed below.

Overcoming the Mental Fatigue:

The theme of mental fatigue has been usually portrayed in literature. According to a study titled *Understanding Mental Fatigue and its Detection: A Comparative Analysis of Assessments and Tools*, mental fatigue is the root cause of reduced productivity and overall cognitive prowess (Kunasegaran et al.). In order to ensure one's survival, it is imperative that their brain functions optimally. Since mental fatigue directly affects brain function, it may also adversely affect survival in tough times. If one looks at the early English literature, the works such as *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, and *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd display the mental distress and fatigue experienced by their protagonists. In recent literature, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, and *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf are good examples of the portrayal of mental fatigue experienced by people through literature. The characters of a post-apocalyptic novel have to undergo countless physical as well as mental struggles to merely survive the harsh surroundings. In *The Road*, both the protagonist and his son undergo such experiences that take a toll on their mental well being. In order to keep themselves sane, the man and the boy engage in various activities that provide them an escape from the grim reality and also aid in preserving their sense of identity. One way in which they managed to escape reality is through play. On his excursions to find food and other necessities, the man tried to find toys for his son. On one such excursion, he found a toy truck which the boy loved to play with, he made roads over the ashes with a stick on which "the truck tooted along slowly. He made truck noises"

(McCarthy 62). His play also distracts the man from reality. Similarly, the survivors in *Station Eleven* try to withdraw from the harsh reality by engaging in activities such as "meeting at the bonfire every night" (Mandel 250-51). Characters from both the novels indulge themselves in leisurely activities despite the grim circumstances, implying the necessity of mental rejuvenation in order to keep their spirit alive. Ultimately, it is a characteristic quality of humans that they would only want to continue with their lives if they can actually live it to the fullest.

Community Building:

Building a community refers to the act of bringing people together to work towards a common goal cooperatively. Building a community becomes even more important during tough times as it improves the chances of survival of the community members by resource sharing and better protection against external threats. Talking about the strategy of community building adopted by post-apocalyptic characters in order to survive, Curtis Claire in her work *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract* says, "they establish a community with an organised system and gradually discover other small, similar communities to connect with, allowing humanity to rebuild" (Curtis 8). In *Station Eleven*, the spirit for community formation is displayed by the survivors dwelling in the Severn City Airport as well as the members of Travelling Symphony. Initially the passengers do not know each other at all when they land at the Severn City Airport and they are very hesitant to socialise and interact with each other. Soon, however, they realise that they have a significant chance of surviving only if they work together as a community. After the restaurants at the airport run out of food, the individuals skilled in hunting skills, one named Tyrone and a woman decide to hunt and bring food for the entire community. "Tyrone set off into the trees with a woman who'd formerly been a park ranger and two TSA-issue handguns, and they returned some time later with a deer" (Mandel 244-245). The sharing of food and other precious resources among the members of a community shows the human tendency of preferring to live in a community in order to increase their chances of survival.

The Road by Cormac McCarthy, the depiction of scenario is very hostile and at one glance, it seems that living in a community cannot be feasible in such an environment where the resources are so scarce. However, as the journey of the father son duo proceeds, it becomes clear that the survivors have a better chance of living when they live together as a community. It is known that humans are social animals and this inherent ability of humans to want social contact is highlighted when the father and son

come across a community of people living in tall buildings. The son is thrilled to see a small child in the street there and later exclaims "I want to see him Papa" (McCarthy 89). The wish of the son to meet that young boy again indicates a yearning for social contact. The significance of living in a community is indicated through various cannibalistic communities in the novel. The father and son come across many such groups, but one stands out to them as it appears very organised. This group of cannibals hunted humans and even dressed the same colour. They appeared, "...all wearing red scarves at their necks. Red or orange, as close to red as they could find" (McCarthy 96), indicating the strong sense of belonging to the particular community, which overall helps to secure better survival, in the hostile environment.

Scavenging:

In a post-apocalyptic world, there is a rampant scarcity of resources. With the collapse of large scale agriculture, and destruction of other means of production, the survivors have little to no supply of the things essential to their survival. During such times, an important strategy of survival employed by the inhabitants of the post-apocalyptic world is scavenging. In *The Road*, McCarthy shows the survivors visiting the ruins of grocery stores, houses, farmhouses, gas stations and other similar buildings in search of essential items such as clothes, blankets, canned foods, tarps etc. On one such scavenging hunt, the father and son find "some utensils and a few pieces of clothing. A sweatshirt. Some plastic they could use for a tarp" (McCarthy 87). They store whatever they find in their cart to ensure their sustenance. In a post apocalyptic society, after the collapse of all the social and economic arrangements, it is impossible to find appropriate and required sources to fulfil human needs for survival, humans are forced to live on the leftovers of the preceding era. According to Jeremy Grossman, "Characters in post-apocalyptic narrative quite often are forced to interact with remains for survival" (Grossman 6). Not only do these remains act as the reminders of the pre-apocalyptic life, they are also the storehouses of the important resources for the survivors.

The characters of *Station Eleven* resort to scavenging for their survival. The members of the Travelling Symphony are especially seen revelling in expeditionary scavenging to collect items of use. In one instance, Kirsten and August, the actors of Travelling Symphony come across a house that hadn't been raided before and they leave with "towels and clothing and a stack of magazines that Kirsten wanted to go through later, an unopened box of salt from the kitchen and various other items that they thought they might use" (Mandel 151). The

people of the Severn City Airport also realise the need for resources in order to sustain themselves and they take to scavenging in order to ensure their survival. They form a scouting party to search the surrounding area for people, communities and resources. This scouting party returns "with three steel carts from an industrial kitchen, piled high with supplies" (Mandel 255), which they find in a nearby abandoned restaurant. The collapse of the entire system of producing capital goods, assets and other resources in a post-apocalyptic world makes scavenging an indispensable survival strategy. The characters of *Station Eleven* and *The Road* understand the value of items in the broken world such as warm clothing and canned food, therefore they do not hesitate to collect them while scavenging the ruins.

Fire and its Importance in Survival

It is a known fact that fire is very important for the survival of humans. It serves many significant purposes for humans- from making the food digestible, providing warmth in cold temperatures, to keeping away the predators. According to J.A. J Gowlett, since humans learnt to control the fire, it has had a major impact in the journey of their evolution (Gowlett 1).

The importance of fire for human existence is highlighted in *The Road*, where the surroundings are dark and cold. The inhabitants rely on fire for providing them warmth, being a source of light during the blinding nights and making food safe to consume. The phrase "no smoke, no movement of life" (McCarthy 82) stands true as the presence of fire is the proof of somebody's existence in the context of the post-apocalyptic world presented in the novel. Fire also holds a symbolic importance in the novel. It is used as a symbol for hope, endurance and adhering to morality in challenging times. The man is seen repeatedly telling his son that they are "carrying the fire" to encourage him to go on during the challenging times. When the boy witnesses his father killing the cannibal with his gun, he is traumatised. To console him, his father tells him, "nothing bad is going to happen to us", "because we're carrying the fire" this seems to console the boy and he repeats "Yes. Because we're carrying the fire." (McCarthy 87). The incident intensifies the value of fire in the mind of the young boy, adding to the significance of fire in the existence and evolution of mankind.

Similarly in *Station Eleven*, fire plays an important role to aid the existence of the people. After the collapse of the modern civilization due to the massive outbreak of Georgia flu, the survivors have to resort to the primitive methods of hunting prey, and gathering edible items both from the wild and from the abandoned houses. Fire, like previously mentioned, helps them to cook the

food and protect them from the cold. One such instance occurs when Kirsten and August get separated from the caravan of the Travelling Symphony and have to arrange food for themselves. They “gather wood for fire” after catching some fish. Even though the “fire smoked badly”, “the smoke replaced the stench of fish from their clothes” (Mandel 143). Fire also serves as a means to promote the sense of belonging and affinity among the residents of the airport. In *Station Eleven* it is seen that “the citizens of the airport had taken to meeting at the bonfire every night” (Mandel 251-252) and this social gathering helps inculcate a sense of togetherness among them. Fire, thus plays diverse roles in the novels selected for study. Apart from ensuring the physical safety of the survivors by enabling them to stay warm, cook their food and be used as a source of light, fire also serves as a symbol of hope and regeneration in both the narratives.

Weapons

Mastering the art of weaponry has helped humans tremendously in the course of evolution. According to Miki Ben-Dor and Ran Barkai, the ability to make precise weapons needed better cognitive abilities, which, in turn, facilitated the development of the human brain. (Ben-Dor and Barkai 1). Weapons played a huge role in the evolution of humans and excelling in the art of using weapons improves the chances of one's survival in the post-apocalyptic world as well. In *The Road* and *Station Eleven*, having a lethal weapon like a gun, ensures that a person has a better chance at defending oneself from others. Beholding a weapon also gives a sense of power over others, as it may easily be used to rob essential supplies like food, clothing etc from them.

In *Station Eleven*, the characters use weapons for a lot of things, especially acquiring food, defending themselves and gaining control over the resources. In the initial days after collapse, people hunt with the help of their guns. The people at the Severn City Airport hunt their first animal with the help of “TSA-issue Handguns” (Mandel 245). Kirsten, the protagonist of the novel, uses the “three knives in her belt” (Mandel 35) for hunting and fighting off attackers. Apparently, the Prophet and his followers also used weapons to get people to submit to them. When they initially came to St. Deborah by the water, “no one had quite realised how much weaponry they had” and “within a week it became obvious that the town was his” (Mandel 126).

In *The Road*, weapons not only serve the purpose of enabling a person to defend themselves, but also of taking their own life to escape a cruel death at the hands of cannibals. The father is seen contemplating taking the life of his son and himself a number of times. At one instance,

he thinks to himself, “I should have done it a long time ago. When there were three bullets in the gun instead of two” (McCarthy 57).

III. CONCLUSION

The study of post-apocalyptic fiction offers a deep insight into human resilience and endurance. It also imparts a deeper understanding of ethics and morality. By placing the characters in a lawless society, they explore the ethical dilemmas faced by the people in the face of adversity. In *The Road*, the dialogues between the man and the boy provide a good understanding of how the subject of morality affects human thinking when their survival is at stake. The study of both of these texts highlights the necessity of practical skills that one needs to have in order to survive. In this manner, the post apocalyptic texts encourage the readers to gain a better understanding of the real-world survival techniques and their importance during the tough times. A variegated study of post-apocalyptic literature is also important in the present times as it deals with relevant themes such as survival, human nature, collapse, and reinvention. Focusing on these themes help the readers gain a finer understanding of human nature and also compels them to imagine a future where even surviving is no less than fighting a battle. In a nutshell, the study of survival techniques of the post-apocalyptic characters beautifully showcases the human experiences in unimaginable circumstances and records their invincible spirit of survival.

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