

# Survival Through Adversity: A Psychoanalytical Study on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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## *Abstract:*

Survival is the ultimate attribution of human life. Human beings try to survive through different circumstances. Survival is not just about being alive but a part of their life journey. One has to be strong both physically and emotionally to get through different and difficult situations. One has to understand and adapt to the situations in order to survive. Human race has encountered many kinds of apocalypse, both natural and name made. The difficult situations they encounter makes the human race strong. They strive to survive in the world which is in an absurd state. This paper intends to state the fact that survival strategies help human beings to encounter any situation, with reference to the experience faced by the refugees and immigrants in *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. This paper further examines how emotions plays an important role in survival and coping mechanisms.

**Key words:** survival, adaptation, existentialism, refugees/immigrants, emotions.

Survival is the act of surviving under unusual situations. Survival is a difficult thing to do but when someone is forced to live in an unfamiliar situation, they have to cope up with everything around them. Human survival instincts are innate and extremely powerful which help them to survive. Humans can survive through any kind of adversity if they are determined. Survival is not just about getting food, finding shelters, but it is about adapting and being resilient. The attitude or practice in life with survival as the main value is known as survivalism. Living and surviving is a bit different from each other. Surviving is to remain alive whereas living is having a life.

To survive one have to adapt to the circumstances. The important trait of survival is adaptation. Adaptation not only applies to the human species but also to the other species. The advanced species of flora and fauna is a result of adaptation. Every plant and animal need to adapt to the environment. The theory of Natural Selection by Charles Darwin states that the traits that offer advantage will most likely to be passed on to offsprings and offspring with those traits have a better chance of surviving. Evolution occurs only by natural selection. Adapting to the circumstance help someone to understand the situation better and can help them to survive. Resilience is the key to survive any kind of adversity.

Being resilient can help one to see the bright side any situation. In *The Road*, the man's inventive efforts to use the remaining natural resources or trashed items to survive shows that he is resilient.

Every existence has its own purpose and value. The purpose of one's life is determined by their own actions. The decision they make determines how their life would be. One's motives determines his/her fate. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that questions the existence of human beings and the purpose of living. 'Authentic' means to be oneself genuinely. As in Existentialism, one cannot be true until they define themselves. The term existentialism is explained in detail in *Existentialism in American Literature* by Ruby Chatterji who opines, "To be a person is to be four-squarely in this actual world, individual, concrete and embodied" (1983, 24). Man has to be true to himself and his actions. "We 'move towards' not only thinking, but in feeling, willing, evaluating and imaging as well" (Chatterji, 1983, p. 20). Life is all about being ourselves without hurting anyone or anything.

Existentialist literature tends to emphasize certain things: man alienated from an absurd world; the individual estranged from society; the individual's isolation and subjectivity; his consequent feelings of anxiety, anguish, despair, nausea; the individual facing his own nothingness, or confronting his guilt; his struggle to distinguish between inauthentic and authentic selves; his assertion of personal freedom through irrevocable choice, particularly in extreme situations, limit situations and crisis situations; death consciousness and the need to define oneself against it. Alienation and isolation has a central place in existentialism. Isolation can help a man to define himself even in an abnormal situation. When a man get to know the purpose of his life, he live to the fullest. When he lives without knowing his purpose of life, he is just spending his days on earth.

Cormac McCarthy depicts the world after apocalypse in his novel, *The Road* (2006). This post-apocalyptic survival fiction puts its characters in an unexpected environment. The fictions of survival genre shows how the main characters are put through some difficult situations like apocalypse, pandemic or powerful antagonist, and how they survive it through. This novel is a postmodern dystopian fiction. It is postmodern because of the ambiguity and how it celebrates differences. It is dystopian in its tone in the portrayal of the characters and in its warning of what may happen if human beings lose civilization and cultural ethos. The main characters in *The Road*, that is, the father and the boy represents the life of refugees and immigrants. *The Road* manifests the portrayal of violence, suffering of the characters and the gloomy atmosphere. They try to survive with almost nothing in the decayed world. They travel hoping for a better place even when they were no sure about their destination. They even have to survive amidst the cannibals. The life of the refugees are very pitiable as they cannot predict how their life would be.

Migration is not new to the human race. People migrate from place to place to find a better dwelling place. But facets of migration has now changed to immigration. Immigration is of two types, voluntary immigration and involuntary or forced immigration. When someone voluntarily immigrate from their country, it is voluntary immigration. When someone is forced to leave their country, it is forced immigration. When someone is forced to leave their country due to some reasons they are considered as refugees. The cause for

immigration could be political turmoil, civil strife, ethnic conflict, cultural class, domestic violence, environmental degradation and economic crisis. Throughout the world more than 281 million people live outside their homeland. Approximately 65 million people have migrated due to war and violence. Immigrants contribute 3.6 percent of the world population.

The refugees and the immigrants are forced to face unpleasant situations. For the people trying to survive, the basic necessities like food, water, shelter and fire are all that matters. When life put someone in unexpected situation, their senses become keener and sharper. These people have to fight for their basic needs and also against their emotional and mental illness. They try their best to get access to good health, shelter, education and employment. These people are most likely to be humiliated and exploited by the residents. The migrants suffer from the pain of being away from their homeland, the memories of their homeland and the pain of leaving behind everything. They try to live along with the residents. But most of the time, they choose or the situation force them to choose the illegal way to live. The struggles these people are facing are traumatizing. These traumatic experiences are left behind as psychological scars which will never heal. But these people try until they reach the destination. People know the struggle of the journey but still they travel because they are so determined to have a safe and better life. These people may get arrested on their journey. They are interrogated and are given severe punishments. One should understand the difference between needs and wants. But these refugees cannot have their needs fulfilled. They do not care about the comfort, they only care to have a better life.

Lois Tyson, Professor Emerita of English at Grand Valley State University, USA, in her *Using Literary Theory: How to Read and Write Literature* explains about many theories in English literature, Psychoanalytic theory is one among them. She explains about the theory of psychoanalysis as:

Psychoanalysis is a theory about the human mind. Psychoanalysis is defined as a form of mental therapy which aims to cure mental disorders by investigating the interaction of the conscious and unconscious elements of the mind. The field of psychoanalysis was developed by Sigmund Freud, Austrian medical practitioner in the late nineteenth century. He is the one who gave the name, psychoanalysis in 1896. He said that people are motivated by desires, fears and conflicts of which they are not aware of. Any human production involving narration, production of images, can be analyzed and interpreted using psychoanalytic tools. (2011, 217)

The human life is filled with emotions and feelings. One cannot live without emotions. The way a human being lives is based on his personal view towards life. To survive through any kind of situation one have to be mentally strong. The inner motivation drives them towards success. Every emotions one experience have an impact over their actions and life. Even the fear they experience may help them build a strong mind.

Fear is a normal human emotion. The sense of fear help human beings to avoid danger. Human beings experience fear when the automatic nervous system releases adrenaline

energizing the system for fight and flight. When a person is terrified, threatened, helpless, or harmed, he/she pay attention to his/her internal experiences and our environment in a different way. And thus our mind and body automatically prepare to fight against any problem. People experience many kind of problems in their day to day life. Living in this absurd world is hard. But when they are put into an uncommon world, they have to fight. Even if they are not a fighter their survival instincts make them fight.

Even a little amount of hope and motivation can drive human beings towards their destination. The greatest motivation comes from one's belief system. In *The Road*, the father's love towards his son made him strong enough to kill a cannibal to save the boy. *The Road* highlights the untainted emotions between a father and a son. Whenever they feel down, they both have conversations which boost their soul like. The man is the only source of love and support for the boy. Though they are in a post-apocalyptic world, the boy is emphatic.

Nothing is permanent. Everything comes to an end at a point, even pain. Every struggle has its end. One have to choose good even if his life is in danger. But most of the time, people choose the evil way which is illegal. Surviving through any kind of adversity is possible for people with strong mind and body. Through the novel *The Road*, McCarthy emphasises the importance of not only bodily survival but also the survival of human generosity and kindness.

#### **References:**

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