



Pandemic: Mapping Fear through Post-Apocalyptic Novels of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Emily Mandel's *Station Eleven*

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Abstract: This paper explores many facets of a pandemic-caused apocalypse using the prism of two very seminal works, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. These literary works become the gateway to explore the human psyche and give a path to unravel the tussle between fear and uncertainty that dominates a pandemic world. These collected works present the true reflection of the human conditions amidst the collapse of a civilization and how it psychologically damages the victims who are surviving with a constant fear of death. Through these works the true reflection of human existence and behavior will be portrayed. The study involves a comparative and qualitative analysis to understand the themes, narratives, dynamics of human existence, and the psychology of the human mind. The paper aims to understand how fear breathes within the human mind when they get exposed to such catastrophic events and survive in the tragic world. The study also draws a parallel with the COVID-19 pandemic and attempts to understand the conditions of people when COVID-19 knocked into our lives.

Index Terms - Psychology, Fear, Pandemic, COVID-19, Apocalypse, Post Apocalypse, James-Lange Theory, Human Psyche, Emotions

1. INTRODUCTION:

In the dawn of the Pandemic, Apocalyptic fiction saw a rise in its views. People started to find themselves among the stories of the fictional characters. This sudden bloom raised questions about whether reality collides with fiction. Literary imagination often visits reality and is often based on real-life events. This brings a sudden comfort to the unrest minds of the people. Literature has frequently explained how imagination paves the way for the future course and people find solace in it as they can envision the future and also work on the present. Apocalyptic novels alleviated the pain of the people going through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apocalypse is a belief that there will be a total destruction of the world or the end of the world catalyzed by a serious event like a Pandemic, Alien attacks, Natural disasters, nuclear war etc. An apocalypse forces a person to envision a world that is devastated by a pandemic and where the twin sister's fear and anxiety try to grapple with the human minds. In the era of a pandemic apocalypse, the world is identified by widespread death, societal collapse, and the crumbling of communities and dynasties. In the midst of darkness, a ray of hope emerges in the form of conforming to this new reality. The survivors try to band together by building new communities and taking control of the situation. They reconstruct and reestablish a new government body.

Obstacles like food, education, and healthcare become the primary concern of the survivors. They begin to rebuild the new society from the ashes of the old. The final stage of the new reality undergoes a process of metamorphosis where the new society adapts and transforms from its teachings learnt from the past pandemic. The new society, then starts to give much more importance to building a stronger community where resilience, sustainability and optimism is reflected through actions. Throughout mapping this trajectory from apocalypse to post-apocalypse, the survivor undergoes immense psychological and emotional challenges. Grief and trauma breaths through them for the rest of their lives. The sorrow of losing one's own and witnessing the crumble of their own community leaves a permanent scar on their hearts. Yet, amidst all the difficulties faced, they try to survive the rest of the lives by being resilient and forms a path of togetherness with the new built society.

This paper majorly focuses on the post-apocalyptic world. In the post-apocalyptic novels, the focuses are more on the survival. It's a war-torn setting and the idea of taking control of your own life is of the primary concerns. The stories deal with how the survivors are at a war with the surrounding due to the disruptive events. The struggle of the characters is often focused on survival. Nature plays an integral part in shaping these new lives of the people. The destruction power of the nature is witnessed by the victims. Post-apocalyptic novels often portray the decline of human civilization through the metaphor of nature reclaiming the world. In this post-apocalyptic realm, pandemic emerges as a primary theme that tries to portray the collective fear and grief of the survivors. This research project tries to explain how literature at times become of superior to science and how it represents the truth of the society. This research analysis the novels *The Road* by Cormac Mc'Carthy and *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel through the lens of COVID-19 pandemic and intense to show a glimpse of the future. These novels serve as a microcosm to the greater danger waiting in the future of mankind. It attempts to show the haunting insights of a chaotic world hugged by a global pandemic. In this exploration, we embark into a comparative exploration through these profound novels that seeks to unravel the intricate layers of human psyche and experience when stuck in a pandemic apocalypse. Through a panoramic inspection of these two novels- *The Road* and *Station Eleven*, this research aims to shed light on the human reaction to pandemics. These novels try to highlight the psychological and emotional trauma faced by individuals and communities in the midst of the darkness that they are surrounded. This research also attempts to understand the narrative techniques used by the respective authors to unfold and seize the very essence of societal collapse and the subsequent reinvention of values in the aftermath of a pandemic. It also attempts to explore the human psyche and map the fear of the individuals through various theories that could enable and represent the very minds of the contemporary people who faced COVID19 how does such devastation effects the human mind. The scars left by these catastrophic events are pertained within the soul permanently which ultimately give birth to even more psychological disorders. This comparative analysis donates to a much nuanced and deeper understanding of the impacts on humanity as portrayed by literature. It offers an insight on human vulnerability, endurance, ethics and resilience of the human soul in the face of catastrophic events.

2. OBJECTIVE:

The aim of this study is to map the very fear breathing in the minds of the survivors of a catastrophe through the lens of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. This research aims to focus on how pandemics effects every aspect of a human. It shakes not only the human psyche but also the very faith of an individual. The characters and situation in both the books help us give a more nuanced understanding of comprehending the human condition at the time of COVID-19 and how people survive a pandemic yet has a strength and hope to rebuild their future and the civilization from the scratch.

2.1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: To introspect the fear breathing within the human psyche at the time of pandemic apocalypse through *The Road* and *Station Eleven*, this study approaches a qualitative analysis to compare, contrast and understand how fear that gets inbuilds in the human psyche can drastically change a person. Through the experiences of the characters of the novels, this study will try to draw parallels with COVID-19 pandemic and try to understand how even in today's world where technology is so advanced, people can relate through similar experiences and the effects might be different on every individual but the scar is left behind is similar. This study will also try to use various theories to build a theoretical framework which will give a much-nuanced understanding of the human psyche with reasons to support the claims.

- 3. LITERATURE REVIEW:** Pandemic whether fictional or historical have been a source of literary imagination since centuries. The Bubonic plague, the Spanish flu and the most recent among all, The COVID-19 had the power to shaken the world. It trembled not only human's psychological mind, the very physical and economic conditions, but among all is the religious faith of the people. They started to question the very meaning of their lives and if God is for real because if he's for real and claims to love all his creation, then what could have made him so cruel? All these circumstances really forced the humans to question about everything.

The Last Man (1826) by Mary Shelly is often considered as the first dystopian novel that articulated about the very possibility of a world to collapse by a plague and some of the people are immune to it. They were given the duty to save the world from the disastrous danger of plague. Akhtar on his paper about Gender Inequality and Literature: A contemporary Issues discussed about the stature a literature has in the society. Literature is considered as an imitator to life who have become the voice of the voiceless through generations. The recent theories have changed the whole map of literature. Margaret Atwood in her novel Oryx and Crake gave us all a hint to the very current pandemic. It talks about a future world where the mankind has been completely perished by a man-made pandemic. It also comes under the genre of Dystopian novels. Abdel Fattah M. Adel, M.A. Al Moghales in their paper Narrative of Epidemics: TopsyTurvy Conditions of Humans and Quest for Existence presents how fiction writers attempts to portray the human condition and the shifts in their behavior at these major junctures in the history. Plot construction and character development account for the void, both within and without the usual chaos, that has the potential to devastate social structures, crippling of religious values, and Government's apathy. Based on such themes, this paper examines, from Deterministic and Existentialistic perspectives.

- 4. RESEARCH GAP:** Through this research, I will try to study the human psyche and map the fear residing within the survivors. How does it affect the human mind and thereafter how that obstructs their capabilities to deal with the reality. With the help of psychological theories, our findings will gain a more logical framework to argue. This study will also walk parallel with the experiences of the survivors of COVID-19 and how does a pandemic impact the lives of people.

4.1. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK-PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY USED TO UNDERSTAND FEAR:

Emotions plays a vital role in understanding the happenings of the world and how a human reacts to the stimuli. They are often consciously experienced. And is a very strong feeling that arouses through a stimulus. It is largely experienced throughout the framework of our body through postures, facial expressions, heart rate and blood pressure. All these join forces to portray the very condition and feeling of the human mind. It's often considered as a very "adaptive form of physiological response". Amygdala which is often resting in the deep chambers of the human brain is responsible for negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, sadness, etc. Fear is often considered as a primitive emotion which traces its roots from the very evolutionary history. It performs as a survival mechanism that helps the humans to protect themselves from any kind of threats or dangers. Many psychologists have tried to understand emotions through scientific experiments. Psychologist have also provided us with psychological theories to understand more about fear as an emotion. Theories like the James Langan Theory of Fear, Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Fear, and Polyvagal Theory of Fear, these are some theories that have tried to map and reason fear through these profound theories. In the novel *The Road* and *Station Eleven*, fear is the most important and ruling theme tangled and weaved very carefully in narrative of the texts. It gives a profound insight on the characters' experience in a postapocalyptic world and how it has shaken their very inside. These novels then try to portray the very nature of fear and how it effects the human condition as well as behavior. This research will primarily focus on James Lange Theory of Emotion.

4.2. MAPPING FEAR THROUGH JAMES-LANGE THEORY AND IT'S IMPACT ON THE HUMAN PSYCHE:

The James-Lange Theory of emotions plays a pivotal role in molding the experience of the characters and understand the narrative techniques in order to get into the emotional depth of the issues through Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. The theory was originally proposed by William James and Carl Lange which suggests that emotions is an output of a physiological response to a stimulus and not that it solely depend on the mental or cognitive nature. The theory advocates the idea that an individual 's interpretation of their physical reactions can be a decisive factor to understand their mental state. By taking in consideration of both the primary texts, we can find out that how the characters' physical

experience of the catastrophic, post-apocalyptic environment in a very nuanced way determines their emotional state and to be precise the internal turmoil which tries to shed light into the concept of how physical experience has the power to influence the emotional state and understand the human existence through these books.

The Road by Cormac McCarthy attempts to portray a world that is destructed by an uncanny, unspecified catastrophe where survival is a daily scuffle for the survivors. The plot involves two major characters, for the protagonist, a man, and his young son. The novel's setting is desolated and inhospitable with darkness lying all over. It is distinguished by the absence of basic survival resources. There's a persistent threat of danger, and a pervasive sense of despair as the people have left their humanity in order to do anything for survival. McCarthy uses picturesque and innate language to describe the physical hardships and challenges faced by the characters, such as hunger, cold, and fatigue, pain. These physical experiences evoked a strong emotional response in the characters who were then driven by that response, and particularly the father, whose pivotal concern was to protect his son and make sure that their survival in a world that seems devoid of hope.

One of the essential aspects of the James-Lange theory is the idea behind how the physiological responses precede an emotional experience of an individual and how it impacts their human psyche. This is very vividly and profoundly portrayed in *The Road* through the development of the characters' somatic reactions to their post-apocalyptic environment where darkness and despair rules. In order to explain this concept in a more nuanced way, we can take an instance from the book like when the father and son are confronted by the threat of starvation, their physical bodies started to respond with the negative feelings of weakness, sheer loneliness, and desperation. These physical sensations then became the reasons that influenced their emotional states, leading to horrifying feelings of fear, anxiety, and despair. McCarthy through his narrative tries to portray this interplay between the physical and emotional realms to highlight the characters' vulnerability and the harsh realities of their existence amidst a land where humanity and extinct and all they can see is ashes and darkness dominating. The James-Lange theory of Fear also revolves around the idea that the emotions are solely conditioned upon the individual's interpretation of physiological responses. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* involves the characters' emotional experiences that have molded their entire perception of the physical conditions of their post-apocalyptic environment. For example, in the book by McCarthy, there's an instance that when the father during the journey falls sick and finally the son for whom the only hope was his father was in the middle of death and life. He finally received a mortal death by leaving his son in despair and darkness. This instance depicts how the interpretation of the physical experience of an individual is extremely subjective in nature and that can simply trigger the emotional state and response of the individual. This also portrays how the physical environment is responsible for a person to internally grapple with feeling of fear.

In Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, the depiction of The James-Lange theory is very much apparent in the way how the characters responses to the post-pandemic world where they are the only survivors. The novel attempts to portray a society that is hit and then devastated by a fictional deadly flu named the Georgia Flue which has wiped out most of the population. The survivors who are left have the task now navigate and generate a new civilization from scratch from a world that is now devoid of any modern conveniences and social structures. It is in this place where survival becomes uncertain and the future look horrifying as hopelessness and darkness surrounds the people of the world. Mandel attempts to explore and analyze through her narrative techniques that how the characters' physical encounter with this new world has started to shape their emotional responses which is triggered by the influence of their sense of identity and purpose to build a society that has collapsed because of the catastrophic event.

The James-Lange Theory of Fear can be very well applied to Mandel's *Station Eleven* that can thereafter become a tool to analyze how the characters' physical experiences influence their emotional responses and, in the result, it molds their sense of self as well as their identity in an absolute desolated world of the post-apocalypse. We can take an instance from Mandel's book in order to understand this concept even better by quoting how in the post-pandemic world, the characters faced continuous threats about their physical safety, as the most prevalent threats were violence, sickness and the very scarcity of basic resources that are required for the survival. These physical challenges that were faced by the character in the pre-pandemic, during pandemic and post pandemic time evokes the despairing feelings of fear, anxiety, and despair. These feelings in turn influence their emotional states and behaviors and how they responded to these stimuluses. The theory attempts to display how the characters' emotions are a direct result of their physical experiences and an output of their interpretations of those experiences. It also tries to highlight the complex relationship between the physical and emotional aspects of the lives and how it impacts the human experiences.

Mapping fear through Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* involves a thorough examination about how the characters responses to the unknown and the uncanny. The threats they witness, and the loss of familiar structures, families and dear ones and their daily routines, all get shattered in a blink of an eye. Fear as portrayed in these novels are not just a reaction to immediate dangers but also a response to the existential uncertainty that pervades their post-apocalyptic worlds. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, fear is palpable from the beginning as the main characters raises from the dark into an unknown land where only ashes are covered like a gray blanket. This very description by the author evokes a sense of hell here Lucifer also raised in the dark. The depiction of fear in this novel is existential and is rooted in the characters' struggle to survive in a world where the rules of civilization have collapsed. McCarthy portrays fear as a constant companion, shaping the characters' actions and decisions as they confront the harsh realities of their existence.

This in turn then throws light on the fragility and vulnerability of the human life in the mask of a hostile environment. In contrary, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* attempts investigate fear through a very different lens, which focuses more on the loss of cultural and social structures that once provided comfort and security. The characters in the novel continuously grapples with the fear of losing their identities, their connections to the past, and their sense of purpose in a world that has been irrevocably changed by a pandemic. This in turn has shaped their fear into anxiety that deeply effects their human psyche and behavior. Mandel through her novel tries to depict fear as a catalyst for both despair and resilience. The characters then must confront their deepest anxieties in order to find new ways to navigate a world that no longer resembles the one they once knew. Mapping fear through these novels reveals the complex interplay between personal and societal fears in the face of catastrophe. Both the authors try to explore how fear shapes human behavior, human relationships, and their beliefs because often faith and believes disappear when confronted with such a catastrophic event. It tries to offer profound insights into the nature of fear itself. Through their narrative techniques, McCarthy and Mandel weaves a interplay where they invite the readers to confront their own fears and contemplate the meaning of courage, resilience, and hope in the darkest of times. This then also brings hope and strength to fight with our own demons in the tough times. By exploring how the characters' interpretations of their physical experiences molds their emotional states, the novels then provide integral insights into the complex nature of human emotions and the ways in which individuals navigate and cope with adversity.

5. CONCLUSION:

The impact of fear as represented in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* can be seen as a very profound reflection of the experiences of many people during the COVID-19 pandemic. The novels through its depiction of the characters must navigate a world which is marked by uncertainty, danger, and isolation in the end evokes the twin feelings of fear and anxiety. These uncanny feelings then resonate with the challenges faced by individuals during the pandemic both fictional pandemic and COVID-19. In McCarthy's *The Road*, fear is portrayed as a pervasive and palpable presence. It has its roots from the characters' struggle for survival in a post-apocalyptic world. The novel's graphic and barren landscape that is surrounded by the blanket of ashes. The narrative is characterized by the scarcity of the very basic resources for survival. There's a constant threat of danger that lingers around the neck of the survivors and the victims. This then mirrors the sense of uncertainty and vulnerability that is experienced by many during the pandemic. The unpredictability of the physical world therefore starts to impact the emotional state which then develops into fear. The characters' fear is not only a response to external threats but also a reflection of their internal struggles with sorrow and despair breathing on the surface of their lives. This highlights the psychological conditions of living in a world which is devoid of hope. Similarly, in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, the plot infuses fear as the most dominating theme that permeates the narrative to reflect the characters' experiences which also acts as mirror to the real world portrays the conditions of humans in a post-pandemic world. The novel attempts to investigate e how fear manifests in different ways and in different shades, such as through the characters' encounters with barbarity, sickness, and deprivation. The *Traveling Symphony*, which travels through the savage territory in order to perform for the survivors in the midst of despair, embodies the characters' resistance and confrontation when it gets encountered with the face of fear. Mandel through her narrative style attempts to portray their resilience and determination for finding a meaning and connection with the humans amidst chaos and uncertainty. These representations of fear that is being portrayed by both the novels can be seen as a reflection of the time of many survivors during the COVID-19 pandemic. It tries to depict the human mind and experiences that are being affected by a pandemic. The fear of being in contact with the virus, and the uncertainty about the future, that is surrounded by isolation which is imposed by lockdowns and social distancing measures have been a pivotal source of creating anxiety and fear for many

people. By the depiction of fear with the help of such vivid and realistic depiction and the use of visceral ways, in both the novels *The Road* and *Station Eleven* presents deep insights into understanding the complexities of human emotions in times of crisis. Also, the ways in which individuals respond to fear and uncertainty. In terms of resemblance and contrasts between these books and the actual COVID-19 pandemic, both *The Road* and *Station Eleven* splits similar thematic elements that echoes with the real-life human experiences of individuals during the pandemic. The sense of isolation surrounding the self, the fear of the uncertainty about everything in life whether its life or future attempts to portray the true picture of the struggles for survival. This is very well depicted in these two novels. They can be seen as mirrors to the world that reflects the challenges faced by many during the pandemic. However, what becomes of utmost essential to note is that these are works of fiction and still it has the ability to depict the real-life picture of the society when they face a pandemic. These novels then act as a sense of comfort who are seeing the hopelessness in the world.

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