

## Beyond the Tradition of Dualism: A Posthumanist Critique of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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**Abstract:** *The belief in human superiority over the non-human significantly contributes to the ongoing ecological crisis, driven by anthropogenic climate change and ecological degradation. Hence, it is pertinent to redefine the conventional understanding of the term "human" to offer a possible solution to the contemporary ecological catastrophe by questioning the narrative of human supremacy. Since the emergence of Cartesian philosophy, thinkers of various disciplines have sought to challenge the concept of human rationality with a view to establishing the symbiotic relationship between humans and the nonhuman. Posthumanism serves as the philosophical basis for intricate, nuanced reasoning by broadening the emphasis to the non-human domain within post-dualistic, post-hierarchical frameworks. In the post-global context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where humanity is estranged from the natural environment, we must reevaluate our worldview regarding the non-human for the sake of a sustainable world. The present paper explores Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) from the perspective of posthumanism to raise certain questions against the notion of human exceptionalism in the context of the contemporary ecological crises. The focus will also be on how the author advocates the symbiotic relationship between human and other organisms by transcending the notion of dualism to offer an alternative discourse for addressing the contemporary ecological crisis.*

**Key Words:** *Dualism, Post-dualism, Posthumanism, Environmentalism, Climate Crisis.*

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### **Theoretical Foundation of Posthumanism**

Posthumanism is a philosophical perspective asserting that humans are not solely constrained by physical and biological limitations but are also shaped by their surroundings and integrated within a broader, evolving ecosystem. Ihab Hassan, the Egyptian-born American literary theorist and author, conceptualised the evolution of humanism into posthumanism. Posthumanism originated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century through the theoretical contributions of researchers including Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Norbert Wiener, Cary Wolfe, N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, Peter Sloterdijk, Francisco Varela, Timothy Morton, Douglas Kellner, Robert Pepperell and others. It seeks to reframe the philosophical notion of humanism by posing questions regarding human identity, the agency of nonhuman creatures, and ethical implications<sup>1</sup>.

The conceptual foundations of posthumanism allow the humanities to reevaluate the human subject within disciplines that have historically overlooked human issues, including geology, biology, physics, earth sciences, and ecology. Similarly, the notion of the Anthropocene incorporates a human dimension into the scientific characterisation of geological epochs that were hitherto delineated without accounting for human impact. The notion of posthumanism, which involves the understanding of individual consciousness, aligns with Donna Haraway's idea of the "cyborg" as articulated in her work, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). Haraway contests the notion of a clear demarcation between technology and humanity, promoting the integration of cyborgs into human identity. The term "cyborg" was introduced in 1960 by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Cline to describe a human with enhanced skills regulated by a specialised customised system.

Posthumanism, as a critical theory, involves the amalgamation of human and machine, challenging the concept of human as independent beings. It illustrates the amalgamation of humans with other life forms and machines through advanced technologies such as cloning, genetic engineering, artificial implants and transplantation, xenotransplantation, artificial intelligence, and related advancements. The Posthuman realm integrates machines and technology, while the posthuman hybrid self recognizes its existence through a dynamic engagement with the encompassing technologies. Galvan posits that this prompts an examination of the nature of humanity in an era where humans merge with machines, biology converges with technology, and nature intermingles with industry<sup>2</sup>. In *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures* (2016), Banerji and Paranjape elucidate the rationale for this hybrid transition in the following manner:

"It is only in recent times, as we enter the twenty-first century that we have been faced with a species-wise blurring of the human boundaries. This has occurred largely due to our global engagement with advanced technology, which has on the one hand pushed us into an information age in which objective and subjective definitions and descriptions of the human have been codified to a degree enabling modification and hybrid transformations; and on the other, quasi-human functional substitutes and surrogates of machinic, bionic and biogenic kinds have appeared on the horizon, leading to a spectrum of alternative humanoids with fuzzy borders"<sup>3</sup>

Posthumanism challenges the notion of human exceptionalism concerning biotechnology, animal rights, genetic manipulation, and abuses of human rights. The current era of ecological awareness combines the beauty of nature with the recognition of a worldwide environmental problem<sup>4</sup>. It is marked by geological instability, in which human activities accelerate environmental disasters. The environmental crisis highlights a paradox where humans are deeply interwoven with and more essential to the environment. In this context, Braidotti contends that the notion of human identity is not only disturbed by technology-mediated relationships in a globally interconnected society but is also shaped by varying perspectives on what defines humanity. Cary Wolfe contends in his introduction to *Animal Rites* (2003) that in the current posthuman era, humans are intricately interconnected with other species through unprecedented material, technological, and informational networks<sup>5</sup>. Bruce Brawn has acknowledged the indistinct borders between humans and non-humans, the disintegration of human bodies, the concurrent advancement of both entities, and a shift from total naturalness to altered artificiality. In this context, Bruce Brawn contends:

“To talk about the present as a time when the boundaries between the human and the non-human are blurred, to imagine that now, more than ever before, our lives are entangled with things, is to produce the historical fiction of the autonomous ‘man’, the human before its entanglements. In this temporalizing mode, posthumanism requires the human, it relentlessly calls it into being. And, thus, it risks becoming yet another ‘anthropological machine’ that, in reimposing the human/inhuman binary, divides the human against itself”<sup>6</sup>

This may signify the initiation of a fruitful interdisciplinary exchange of culture between once isolated fields of knowledge. Failing to address the inevitable conflicts and contradictions within the interdisciplinary challenges of the environmental humanities may lead to the emergence of numerous unclassifiable combinations (e.g., nature/cultures, body/minds, material/semiotic, onto-ethico-epistemological, etc.). Hence, the philosophy of posthumanism aims to deconstruct the notion of the human subject and individual power, prioritising impersonal, collective, institutional, medial, technical, material, or ecological forces and networks. Furthermore, they want to dismantle objectifying science from a relational onto-epistemology. Cary Wolfe, examining the issue through the lens of critical animal studies, contends that the humanist understanding of the individual is inextricably linked to the vocabulary and framework of speciesism. According to Donna Haraway, the cyborg symbolises a deliberate refusal and rebuilding of the principles of the traditional humanism, as it obscures the distinctions between human, animal, and machine<sup>7</sup>.

The primary concern to be analysed is the plausibility of eliminating, or at least substantially reducing, human subjects and personal agency in favour of impersonal relational ontologies. Although poststructuralism has offered significant insights into the limitations of individual self-determination in domains like language, biopolitics, and materiality, it has failed to eradicate the notion of the liberal humanist subject from the humanities, in both theory and practice. Francesca Ferrando’s philosophical posthumanism, which includes post-humanism, post-anthropocentrism, and post-dualism, represents a unique and innovative

perspective within the discipline of philosophy. It is pertinent to mention that Ferrando contests the prevailing notion of human superiority and the conventional understanding of human identity. An analysis of Ferrando's post-humanism, post-anthropocentrism, and post-dualism elucidates their influence on our understanding of the human predicament and our relationship with the external world. Hence, her philosophy of posthumanism seeks to deconstruct and reconstruct the concept of humanity. She promotes a broader understanding of the term "human" by deconstructing humanist paradigms that have traditionally emphasised human exceptionalism. She asserts that posthumanism entails acknowledging the multiplicity of human experiences. Rather than perceiving humans as a monolithic entity, they are regarded as distinct individuals, hence contesting the humanist tradition that presumes a generalised and universal perspective on humanity. Posthumanists contest traditional notions of humanity and acknowledge the fluidity of human identity. It is a philosophical movement that challenges the primacy of humanity within the universe. Hence, Ferrando promotes a paradigm shift that recognises the independence and interrelation of all organisms within the natural world.

Ferrando characterises post-anthropocentrism as a paradigm that aims to redirect attention from people to non-human phenomena. It acknowledges that humans have historically had a privileged status within hierarchical structures and seeks to contest this ontological privilege conferred upon the human species. This perspective challenges the concept of human supremacy over other life forms and instead affirms the "intrinsic value" and rights of all forms of life. Ferrando's repudiation of strict classification and binary reasoning is seen in her concept of post-dualism. This assertion contests the idea that all life forms may be reduced to binary oppositions such as "mind" and "body," "human" and "non-human," or "nature" and "culture." She asserts that post-dualism acknowledges dualism as a stringent approach to delineate identity, rooted in a limited comprehension of the self and articulated through symbolic dichotomies. Post-dualism promotes a more sophisticated comprehension of reality by recognising the inherent diversity and interdependence of all entities. Hence, post-dualism contests binary frameworks, facilitating new viewpoints and a more holistic worldview.

Ferrando's post-humanism, post-anthropocentrism, and post-dualism have extensive implications for numerous fields of research. These theories promote a more compassionate and inclusive perspective on our interactions with the natural world by prompting a reassessment of our ethical responsibilities towards non-human entities. They provide challenges in delineating reality and prompt us to transcend binaries to explore other modes of existence. Furthermore, Ferrando's perspectives are significant to contemplate concerning current issues such as climate change, animal rights, and inequality. Her writing necessitates a re-evaluation of our treatment of the Earth and its inhabitants by shifting the focus from human exceptionalism to a more inclusive perspective.

Neil Badmington contends that posthumanism must be understood in relation to its unique association with humanism<sup>8</sup>. He achieves this by resolutely avoiding the temptation of what he, inspired by Derrida, characterises as an "apocalyptic" perspective that tends to

prematurely endorse the deterioration of humanity. Since posthumanism is sometimes viewed as a critique of humanism, it is essential to dismantle the anthropocentrism embedded in humanist ideologies without discrediting them. Braidotti contends that the posthuman is not a separate thing but a key instrument that traverses the several frameworks that together define and deconstruct the notion of humanity. The aim is to utilise a deconstructive methodology to interrogate the anthropocentric prejudices that have shaped our understanding of humanity.

### McCarthy and Environmental Ethics

Cormac McCarthy (1933) is a modern American novelist whose works frequently portray violent and unyielding perspectives on enigmatic aspects of humanity. His works predominantly explore the interplay between man and nature, emphasising the detrimental effects of both on the entire ecosystem. He posits that humans are perpetually cognisant of nature's impact on their existence through air, sustenance, and water. However, what occurs if humanity forfeits the beneficial resources provided by nature? The paper examines McCarthy's profound depiction of a desolate America in his novel, *The Road*, via the lens of posthumanism with a view to questioning the notion of human exceptionalism. The narrative chronicles the expedition of a man and his son over a devastated terrain. An unidentified catastrophe has struck the earth, resulting in widespread devastation and environmental contamination. All humans have perished, leaving just a few vestiges of humanity and a small number of surviving dogs. The atmosphere is perpetually obscured by dust and hazardous particulates. The weather is exceedingly frigid and humid. Elements of civilisation have deteriorated; the splendour of the natural environment has vanished; and the last human survivors traverse the terrain in a constant quest for sustenance. In this context, it is pertinent to raise certain questions to subvert the traditional dualistic framework of isolating human from the natural world:

- What significance does the physical-geographical context have in the novel?
- What is the position of nature within the hierarchical power structure?
- In what manner are environmental disasters and crises depicted in the novel?
- What is the link between nature, the environment, and characters in McCarthy's *The Road*?
- To what extent is it challenging or simple to envision McCarthy's dystopian vision?
- What does *The Road* eventually imply about McCarthy's profound view of America as a hellish wasteland?

To evaluate McCarthy's environmental ethics, it is essential to comprehend his connections to environmental philosophy and the critical perspective of the Western paradigm. Katie McShane thinks that environmental ethics is "the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents"<sup>9</sup>. This indicates that the environmental philosophy has an impact on McCarthy, as evidenced by the settings of his novels. In this context, William Schafer remarks:

"One of McCarthy's astonishing talents is the intensely evocative quality of his landscapes and dramas of animal life. Fully as important as the human actions in the story are animals which emerge as more than symbolic—they are an analogical extension of the story of man in the landscape"<sup>10</sup>

### **Textual Analysis**

In the novel, McCarthy depicts a geography of a borderless world. The terrible atmosphere pervades the events for the entirety of the story. During precipitation, the rain gets saturated with ash. The locations traversed by the Man and the Boy are frightening and unpleasant. The universe presents a depiction of grotesque rural areas and repugnant urban environments. The author writes:

“The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell”<sup>11</sup>

The earth is physically ravaged and morally depleted. Flora and fauna are deceased or perishing. The unyielding struggle for existence precipitates moral decay and a diminution of humanity. As a result, society reverts to a primitive condition where individuals, motivated by instinct, engage in conflict over sustenance and contend for existence similar to animals. The narrative is filled with biblical allusions set against a depraved and repugnant society that is irredeemable. The protagonist remains intentionally unidentified, which carries dual significance. Firstly, the man serves as a prototype for all men, imparting a sense of universality to the readers; secondly, the man's name becomes inconsequential as there are scarcely any individuals remaining in that post-apocalyptic world to differentiate among themselves. They subsist on canned food that they scavenge every day, trudging along with a shopping cart—possibly a symbol of capitalist materialism and an emblem of the conventional society the man longs for—alongside two knapsacks and a revolver for self-termination if apprehended. They eschew human interaction due to the prevalence of cannibalism, among other reasons. McCarthy's landscape is intertwined with nihilism: lacking colours, sounds, life, movement, and the presence of God. The environment is characterised solely by impenetrable darkness and an unsettling emptiness. This vivid representation of the natural world questions the notion of human autonomy and justifies the fact the survival of one species depends on other. All organisms of the biosphere are interrelated and interdependent. The author articulates:

“The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. [...] The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust...”<sup>12</sup>

Nature, perhaps scarred by a nuclear holocaust, is neither attractive nor prelapsarian but rather a harsh wilderness devastated by human encroachment. The wilderness is chaotic, destructive, and unruly. Consequently, instead of viewing nature with profound reverence, an individual may perceive it as a plausible and omnipresent backdrop to all forms of existence. From a poststructuralist viewpoint, one could assert that the structure of Nature has been deconstructed and decentralised. Hence, McCarthy's representation of the natural world justifies the notion of a post-anthropocentric worldview as Francesca has pointed out in her book, *Philosophical Posthumanism*.



The narrative depicts a desolate, mute, and atheistic environment that subverts the dichotomy of nature and culture. Nonetheless, whenever it communicates, it articulates a desire for retributive annihilation in response to the crimes perpetrated on it. A seismic event rouses the man and his kid. The sensitive child is frightened. Subsequently, they observe thunder, lightning, precipitation, snowfall, and wildfires throughout the harsh winter. The forest continued to burn; the trees resembled black skeletons, consuming and annihilating all within their vicinity. The orange glow of the fire, visible to the man in a colourless environment, seemed to him a potential return of the Sun, long obscured by thick, dark ash. The opposing imagery of colours serves as a metaphor to symbolise the bleak and dreary existence of two tramps who maintain the “fire inside” to endure. The trees began to collapse sequentially, producing crashes that disseminated the conflagration among the embers. Hence, Braidotti’s concept of the deconstruction of human exceptionalism is evident in the powerful articulations of the author.

The accessibility of sustenance in this desolate nation is crucial for the father. They minimally nourish themselves, often in a state of starvation, yet persistently traverse the woodlands toward the South. McCarthy poses a profound inquiry into the eventuality that, upon the collapse of human infrastructure, science, and technology, Nature becomes the sole recourse. Nonetheless, if nature has been plundered and irrevocably damaged, all prospects for existence and survival are unequivocally nullified. In times of extreme hunger and existential turmoil, the man instructs his son to cultivate perseverance and resilience. The author articulates, “We have water. That’s the most important thing. You don’t last very long without water”<sup>13</sup> This representation justifies the reciprocal relationship between the human and the world of non-human by raising a very vital question against the notion of human autonomy as Cary Wolfe argues that humans are interconnected with other species.

If the inhabitants are virtuous, nature reciprocates with benevolence, as it is in the forests that individuals gather morel mushrooms and apples. The waterfall enables them to revitalise themselves. The boy is captivated by its beauty and is reluctant to depart, yet the man recognises that others may also be drawn to the waterfall, rendering the situation perilous for them. Throughout the narrative, the boy refrains from entering any dwelling due to his lack of trust in others. The boy obstructs the man from entering and saving any structure due to his fear. While traversing the southern mountains, they could hear the distinct cracking sound of trees being felled consecutively. The man calmed down his scared child by saying, “All the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later. But not on us”<sup>14</sup>. It’s possible that the father is positive and showing his child how to hold on. It could be a sign of how much people trust nature, that it won’t hurt the “good guys”. This concept is visible in Morton’s notion of “deep ecology” as evident in *The Ecological Thought*, which argues that nature is a paradox, having both good and bad, positive and negative things in it in a complicated “mesh”. In this context, Morton argues:

“Ecological thought imagines interconnectedness which I call the mesh. Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom? The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is full of “itself” ...Ecological thought imagines a multitude of entangled strange strangers”<sup>15</sup>

So, this shows that nature is a complex of different things that are linked to each other. Everyone and everything are connected to each other, and nature is always there in everything. The religious ambivalence is apparent as the man kneels, denouncing God for his existence. He admonishes God for causing them considerable suffering. The prevailing question that persists is whether God exists in this world. Nietzsche argues that “Gods, too, decompose!” “God is dead! God remains dead!”<sup>16</sup>, indicating that no transcendent entity will rescue humanity from this absurd condition. Ely, the sole identified character in the text, remarks that death is a luxury in these dire times. Ely acknowledges his constant travels by indicating the fact that he has forsaken human interaction and attachment. Hence, the representation of Ely echoes the need for the disruption of the boundary of human and the natural world.

The sole sustenance remaining in this ravaged earth is the flesh of one another. Consequently, the survivors have metamorphosed into cannibals for survival. Following five arduous days of fasting, they encounter a large house to scavenge for sustenance. The boy, being naïve, is undoubtedly anxious about approaching the unfamiliar house. He claims he will leave the house, but the Man disregards him. Upon entering a basement room, the Man is appalled to discover a collection of emaciated, nude, malodorous, and amputated individuals, both male and female, who have been retained as sustenance for the cannibalistic marauders. The individuals were pleading for assistance. The man seized the boy and fled the premises to ensure their safety. This, therefore, suggests that the survival of humans is solely dependent on other organisms of the biosphere. Hence, human is not the master rather they are a part of the entire ecosystem.

McCarthy illustrates the ethical decay of post-apocalyptic survivors, when the differentiation between good and evil has become indistinct. The novel illustrates the ludicrous conduct of postmodern men who are lost, estranged, and despondent, driven to the extremes of both physical and psychological endurance. It interrogates the endurance of moral values in a fragmented society, referencing the Biblical oracle that man requires more than just sustenance for survival. Ultimately, they proceed southward; nevertheless, Man's health declines, and shortly thereafter, he passes away. Nevertheless, the boy equips the son to endure in a merciless world, adhering to their longstanding practices. Initially, he retained two cartridges to eliminate the boy before his demise; nevertheless, he subsequently accepted death, recognising that the boy could endure independently. The concluding episode of the novel has the boy encountering a benevolent family consisting of a husband, a wife, a young boy, and a young daughter. The boy bids farewell and joins their company, concluding the tale with a sense of hope and a commitment to the perpetuation of virtue. The lesson that McCarthy presents for readers to understand, interpret, and accept is the mutual sustainability of all organisms within nature, echoing Coleridge's sentiments in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

“He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us;  
He made and loveth all”<sup>17</sup>



McCarthy depicts a post-apocalyptic saga set in a world characterised by overcast skies and ravaged terrain. In the absence of civilisation and any visible human presence, he examines the impact of the apocalypse on a father and son journeying together through a desolate, overcast, malevolent environment. In this tumultuous environment, the father converses with his son:

“Can I ask you something?

Yes. Of course, you can.

What would you do if I died?

If you died, I would want to die too.

So, you can be with me?

Yes. So, I could be with you.

Okay”<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

McCarthy's *The Road* is a harrowing and macabre narrative depicting America's future as a desolate wasteland. The author narrates certain events in a terrifying, dreamlike manner to illustrate his profound vision for the entire world. The novel portrays a post-apocalyptic America transformed into a desolate and arid landscape, narrating a tale that is both bleak and terrifying. The author demonstrates his profound foresight concerning the future of the entire human civilisation by portraying specific events in a vivid manner. The availability of food in this barren country is essential for the father. They provide themselves with meager sustenance, frequently experiencing starvation, yet consistently journey through the woodlands toward the South. McCarthy presents a significant question on the possibility that, following the disintegration of human infrastructure, knowledge, and technology, Nature emerges as the significant part for maintaining sustainability. The dualistic framework of considering human as superior is questioned through the powerful articulations of the author. Hence, a symbiotic relationship between the human and the non-human is the urgent need of this hour. However, if nature has been exploited and irreparably harmed, all possibilities for existence and survival will be extinguished. Hence, a posthumanist critique of the novel enable us to raise certain questions against the narrative of human autonomy by foregrounding the necessity of embracing the idea of harmonious coexistence between human and natural world for a better future.

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