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**NEUROTIC PERSONALITIES, UNCONSCIOUS CONFLICTS, AND
REPPRESSED EMOTIONS: A POSITIVE PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF THE
POST-APOCALYPTIC CONDITION IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S THE ROAD**

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*Positive Psychology,
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Abstract

Victims of various apocalypse can re-frame their catastrophic condition to a new phase of life. Positive Psychoanalysis diverges from the conventional psychoanalytic method of focusing on the negative aspects of the human psyche by emphasizing the optimism of the human Psyche, moving away from the pessimism of the traumatic events. The Paper explores the Neurotic Personalities, Unconscious Conflicts, and Repressed Emotions in the characters (Father and Son) of the American novel *The Road*, surviving in a barren and chaotic Post-apocalyptic world. Employing a Positive Psychoanalysis lens, the investigation is further expanded by probing into the two main characters gripped in fear of death and loss. The psychic experience is elucidated in the context of a post-apocalyptic world and this elucidation requires the Freudian, Pre-Freudian, and the positive psychoanalytic concepts for a better understanding. The Paper explores how the Son develops an optimistic psyche while the father dies unable to cope with the pessimistic state of the apocalypse.



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1. Introduction

Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have concentrated on the betterment of the negative. It is not completely done unless Positive Experience is actively brought into the lives of the patients. Adding a new clinical aspect to what psychoanalysts do, Positive Psychoanalysis looks at what makes for an optimistic life experience rather than the typical focus on negative experiences and difficulties.

Mark Leffert is a popular contemporary psychoanalyst who has published a book on Positive Psychoanalysis. He calls this book (in other word, the concept of positive psychoanalysis) aims “to avoid an ancient dictum of therapeutic action: to replace neurotic misery with everyday unhappiness. It introduces a previously unnamed aspect of our discipline: Positive Psychoanalysis... Positive Psychology as a clinical discipline has been with us for some time. It was already firmly established at the start of the millennium (Seligman & Czikszentmihalyi, 2000) even if it has gone largely unnoticed among psychoanalysts.” (Leffert 01).

Kissen (1995) argued, that: “We can no longer rely upon conceptions solely centered upon negative affects such as anxiety, guilt and anger, and must increasingly shift our attention to a broad and differentiated array of positive affects and affective attitudes such as exhilaration, joy, effectiveness, hopefulness and courage which have been much too neglected in the psychoanalytic literature.” (233)

Sigmund Freud is the pioneer of Psychoanalysis. Barry elucidates that the purpose behind psychoanalysis is “to get the patient talk freely, in such a way that the repressed fears and conflicts which are causing the problems are brought into the conscious mind and openly faced, rather than remaining ‘buried’ in the unconscious. This practice is based upon specific theories of how the mind, the instincts and sexuality work. These theories were developed by the Austrian Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)” (97).

Whereas, Habib refers to Psychoanalysis as “recent phenomenon”, “The Psychology of literature is hardly a new concern: ever since Aristotle, critics, rhetoricians, and philosophers have examined the psychological dimensions of literature, ranging from an author’s motivation and intentions to the effect of texts and performances on an audience. The application of psychoanalytic principles to the study of literature, however, is a relatively new phenomenon, initiated primarily by Freud and, in other directions, by Alfred Adler and Carl Jung. The notion of the “unconscious” can be found in any thinker prior to Freud, notably in some of the Romantics such as Schlegel, in Schopenhauer, and in Nietzsche.” (233).

Freud’s major theories include repression, neurosis, unconscious, sexuality, the interpretation of dreams, and instincts. The paper aims to critically analyze Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* with the psychoanalytic approach including a few specific Freudian concepts.

Graham Music says, “Much psychoanalytic thinking, particularly in the Kleinian tradition, has placed particular emphasis on the negative, on the ability to process painful affects, on working with more destructive parts of the personality, and on the developmental significance of developing ‘depressive’



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capacities. I do not for one moment want to suggest that we throw the baby out with the bathwater, or abandon any of these central therapeutic preoccupations. I do think, though, that we also need other strings to our bow so that we can help patients grow psychologically in other ways, and at the same time still know that we are doing psychoanalysis. At an early stage in one of my psychotherapy trainings I was given a very clear message that the job of the psychoanalytic psychotherapist was to help patients manage and process the negative; and the explicit communication to me was that the job of therapy was to 'look after the negative and the positive will look after itself'. Over the years I have found that clinically this is not enough, and that some patients' lives have simply not improved enough by only 'looking after the negative.'" (435-436)

Left brain activation, according to Siegel (2007), is not just about happy versus negative feelings, but also about the ability to 'move towards' experience, which is found more of it in strong and assertive personalities and less in scared and neurotic personalities with higher right brain activity. The left-right brain connections are particularly important, according to Siegel, because emotional health is intimately linked to the intricacy of neural pathways and connectivity between different sections of the brain. People who identified themselves in a more mixed way, in terms of positive and negative characteristics, were more robust in studies (Niedenthal & Showers 1991)

Post-Apocalypse is a sub-genre of Science Fiction. Science Fiction is never limited to aliens, space ships, and technological inventions. Darko Suvin states, "Science fiction is . . . a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition," (08). A science fiction novel must generate an apparent difference from the author's empirical reality and yet maintain a connection to it. *The Road* qualifies with these lines, "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (03). *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* includes "Apocalyptic Science fiction" in its list of sub-genres (Bould et al. 2009, 458), traces its origins to Mary Shelly's *Last Man* (1826), and finally lists its various dominant tropes: the ecological disaster, the alien invasion, and the atomic.

2. Positive Psychoanalytic Investigation of the novel

Anxiety, sadness, or other emotions of unhappiness or suffering that are out of proportion to a person's circumstances are symptoms of neuroses. They may impede a person's ability to operate in nearly any aspect of his life, including relationships and external affairs, but they are not severe enough to render him incapacitated. Affected individuals do not experience the loss of sense of reality like those with psychoses do.

The plot is set in Post-Apocalyptic America. The post-apocalyptic literature is a "sub-genre of speculative fiction characterized by taking place in a world after some catastrophic disaster or devastation. The main characters scrape a living in a world decimated either socially, politically, or environmentally, most often a combination of all three" (Stanton, 1). This condition is more than apparent in *The Road*, as there are two main characters wandering in the devastated and entirely anarchic country of America, struggling to survive by eating whatever crosses their way and staying away from the other people, some of which have turned



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into cannibals due to the need to stay alive. The father wakes up in the woods, “nights [are] dark beyond darkness and the days greyer each one than what had gone before” (McCarthy, 1). After a catastrophe, a father and son journey on foot across the ash covered scenario. The boy’s pregnant mother committed suicide during the event. Rotten Corpses, deserted houses, landscapes devastated by fire are the atmosphere of their place. They are determined to survive and try to save themselves with the little food and a shelter. They go through challenging circumstances to escape attacks. They retain their humanity calling themselves to be “good guys”. The boy is largely determined not to harm anyone but constantly helps all those who are struggling. His father’s health becomes pathetic as he coughs continuously. “He spat in the road a bloody phlegm. Getting up this morning, he said.” He coughs up blood and falls dead beside his son in the woods during a dark mid night. The boy spends several days with the corpse and later gets invited by a kind family. The novel ends with the boy going along with the new family.

The Plot unveils the repressed emotions, unconscious conflict and neurotic personality of the characters. The father wakes up “With the first gray light” leaves the boy sleeping and walked out to the road. He was “Barren, silent” as he goes through an unconscious conflict. “He thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years.” (McCarthy 1). The Post-apocalyptic state is the primary cause of unconscious conflict, repressed emotions and neurotic personality.

Unconscious conflict can be painful, as Habib explains that Freud reasoned and argues that whatever a patient had forgotten must have been upsetting (alarming, painful, humiliating), and that this was why it had been erased from conscious recollection. That is the unconscious is painful as in “He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. 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. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone. Such a painful state causes unconscious conflict.” (McCarthy 11).

The Unconscious conflict can be painful out of nostalgia as the father says, “It's the house where I grew up. The boy stood looking at it. The peeling wooden clapboards were largely gone from the lower walls for firewood leaving the studs and the insulation exposed. The rotted screening from the back porch lay on the concrete terrace. Are we going in? Why not? I'm scared. Don't you want to see where I used to live? No. It'll be okay. There could be somebody here. I don't think so. But suppose there is? He stood looking up at the gable to his old room. He looked at the boy. Do you want to wait here? No. You always say that. I'm sorry. I know. But you do” (McCarthy 20).

The unconscious is alarming as the father and son are often alarmed that there would be someone to attack them. They hesitate to walk on the road. The dreams of the boy also represent the repression and the unconscious conflict. The painful loss of a wife and a mother is the root cause as Habib explains, “Reasoning that everything forgotten by a patient must have been somehow distressing (alarming, painful, shameful), Freud concluded that this was precisely why it had been expunged from the conscious memory. Freud hypothesized that, in the neurotic, any powerful impulse or instinct which was embarrassing continued to operate in the realm of the unconscious where it retained its full “cathexis” or investment of



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energy. This instinct began to seek substitutive satisfaction by circuitous routes and would produce neurotic symptoms. This is the process that Freud called repression, which he regarded as primary mechanism of defense whereby the ego was obliged to protect itself against any renewed threat of the repressed impulse by a permanent investment of energy. Freud saw repression as the foundation of our understanding of neuroses. His new conclusions changed the nature of the physicians' task: he was no longer simply redirecting an impulse which had found an abnormal outlet, but rather attempting to uncover repressions and to replace them with conscious acts of judgement. From this time on, Freud called his investigative method not catharsis but Psychoanalysis" (574)

"Freud argued that among the latent dream thoughts, one in particular stands out from others (which are residues of waking life) and governs the construction of the dream, using the day's residues as its material. This prominent, isolated thought is a wishful impulse and the dream represents the satisfaction of this impulse. During sleep, Freud argued, the ego is focused on withdrawing energy from all the interests of life, and relaxes its expenditure of energy upon repression. The unconscious impulse uses this opportunity to make its way into consciousness via the dream. But the ego maintains some of its repressive resistance as a kind of censorship of the dream: the latent dream thoughts are obliged to undergo alteration, a process Freud called dream distortion, so that the forbidden meaning of the dream is unrecognizable. Hence, Freud defined dream as the disguised fulfillment of a repressed wish (Freud 28)..... While a dream expresses fulfillment of a repressed wish, it can also continue the preconscious activity of the previous working day, expressing an intention, a warning, or a reflection. Psychoanalysis can exploit this dual feature of the dream to obtain knowledge of the patient's conscious and unconscious processes." (Habib, 577)

"In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell. Her smile, her downturned eyes. In the morning it was snowing again. Beads of small gray ice strung along the light-wires overhead. He mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death. He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory. From daydreams on the road there was no waking. He plodded on. He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music. Gold scrollwork and sconces and the tall columnar folds of the drapes at either side of the stage. She held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stockings through the thin stuff of her summer dress. Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned."

In his book, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Freud defines fear, its causes and manifestations, "Real fear seems quite rational and comprehensible to us. We may testify that it is a reaction to the perception of external danger, viz., harm that is expected and foreseen. It is related to the flight reflex and may be regarded as an expression of the instinct of self-preservation. And so, the occasions, viz., the objects



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and situations which arouse fear, will depend largely on our knowledge of and our feeling of power over the outer world” (2).

From this perspective, the boy’s fear of death is very real knowing that wherever he looks, he sees death, dying and decay. Moreover, another very powerful fear is that of separation. This fear Freud explains as the one occurring at birth when a baby is separated from the mother and is continued throughout life repeatedly, manifested as the fear of being or staying alone (Freud, 3). As with the fear of death, the fear of loss is evident in the boy’s behaviour and specifically emphasized in the scene where he sees another boy or believes he has seen one. This is illustrated by the very first conversation in the novel. “Hi, Papa, he said. I’m right here. I know.” (McCarthy, 2).

The father dies while the boy survives and enters a new life with a couple. The boy “stayed three days and then he walked out to the road and he looked down the road and he looked back the way they had come. Someone was coming. He started to turn and go back into the woods but he didnt. He just stood in the road and waited” (McCarthy 174) Then He “walked back into the woods and knelt beside his father... Then he rose and turned and walked back out to the road.” (McCarthy 175).

3. Conclusions

Graham Music claims, “Research in the last few decades has shown that being happy is not at all the same as not being unhappy, and similarly the absence of happiness is quite different from the presence of unhappiness. The ways in which our minds and brains process negative emotions are different from those whereby we process positive emotions, using different brain circuitry and hormonal systems.” (438)

The setting of the novel is a devastated America, the phase after the catastrophe. There is complete hopelessness, the title *The Road* signifies it and even the names of the characters are stripped away. Hence, the novel is purely Post-Apocalyptic. The Apocalypse and the Post-Apocalypse phase are the prominent cause for the Unconscious conflicts, Repressed emotions, and Neurotic personalities. The psyche of the characters is affected due to the apocalypses like COVID’19 Pandemic, Nuclear holocaust and Climatic changes. But with the Positive Psychoanalysis, There is a shift in the Human Psyche towards optimism and survival, moving forward to a new phase of life after the catastrophe.

4. Authors Contribution

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.

5. Conflict Of Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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