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Research Article**Whispers of a Forgotten World:
Memory and remembrance in Post-Apocalyptic and Dystopian Worlds of Cormac McCarthy's
The Road and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*****Nazanin Zahabi nejad***

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ABSTRACT

In post-apocalyptic and dystopian literature, memory emerges as a powerful narrative device, bridging the past with the present and illuminating themes of survival, identity, and resistance. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* explore the multifaceted role of memory in profoundly altered worlds. In *The Road*, memory serves as both a source of hope and despair, anchoring the father's resolve to protect his son while offering glimpses of a lost world. McCarthy's fragmented narrative structure mirrors the instability of a world devastated by catastrophe, where memory becomes an emotional lifeline and a moral compass. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, memory functions as an act of rebellion for Offred, preserving her identity against Gilead's oppressive regime. Her recollections provide a mental refuge, a means of resistance, and a testimony to humanity's resilience. Both works depict memory as a double-edged sword, essential for survival but often a source of pain. This comparative analysis underscores the enduring role of memory in navigating desolation, sustaining hope, and affirming the human spirit.

Keywords: Identity, Memory, Resistance, *The Road*, *The Handmaid's Tale*



1. INTRODUCTION

In post-apocalyptic literature, the themes of memory and remembering play a vital role, serving as crucial narrative devices that bridge the gap between the lost civilization of the past and the harsh realities of the present world. They also inform the characters' sense of self and their place in the changed world, fuel their resolve and drive to protect what little remains of the past as a form of resistance against the absolute chaos, and offer glimmers of hope and the possibility of rebuilding or reclaiming what has been lost, allowing authors to explore themes of identity, survival, legacy, and the human capacity for resilience in the face of overwhelming changes. This is prominently displayed in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both novels use memory as a tool for survival, resistance, and a means of understanding one's place in a drastically altered world. However, in *The Road*, memory plays a particularly significant role in driving the narrative and deepening the emotional resonance of the characters' journey through a devastated landscape.

2. DISCUSSION

The significance of memory in *The Road*

In *The Road*, McCarthy portrays a bleak, post-apocalyptic landscape where memory serves as a sharp contrast to the present desolation. The father and son's journey through a devastated world is punctuated by the father's memories of a pre-apocalyptic life, providing a poignant juxtaposition between what was and what is.

Tim Edwards in his essay "The End of the Road: Pastoralism and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*", draws a comparison between Emerson's description of the enchanting Garden of Eden and its ruined landscape after the fall of the man and *The Road*'s world before the catastrophe and after it. He says:

This passage rehearses in miniature what McCarthy's novel as whole accomplishes: a juxtaposing of a seemingly Edenic past with a clearly hellish present; yet that Edenic past seems to carry in it, somehow, the seeds of its own destruction. The mixed nature of this lost past is further indicated in another memory sequence, an extended description of a day on the lake with the man's uncle. (7)

The father's recollections of a world filled with color, life, and normalcy highlight the loss experienced in the present. These memories are not merely nostalgic but serve as a connection to a past that provides a framework of meaning and hope. For instance, the father often recalls moments with his wife, a symbol of the world they lost: "She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift" (39). These past experiences trouble him deeply, but they also strengthen his determination to protect his son and pass down to him at least some of the lost civilization's values.

In another instance, McCarthy writes: "He could remember everything of her save the smell. Seated in a theater 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" (11). Here, the vividness of the Father's memory is so strong, contrasting starkly with the colorless and lifeless world they now inhabit. These memories act as an emotional anchor, providing a fleeting escape from the grim reality they face daily.

Memory as a Source of Hope and Despair

The father's memories also serve as a source of hope, a reminder of what humanity is capable of, and what they might strive to rebuild. Yet, they are equally a source of despair, emphasizing the irretrievable loss of the world they once knew. His dream of the wife, for instance, brings both comfort and sorrow: "In dreams his bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy" but waking up, he is faced with the grim reality of



their world devoid of such beauty (11).

These memories often torment him, especially as he struggles with the task of preparing his son for survival in this new, harsh world which lacks all those glorious colors and beauties of his dreams. But the father's struggle to reconcile his memories with the present reality highlights the enduring human need to cling to the past, even when it brings pain.

For the son, who was born after the apocalypse, memories of the old world are second-hand, inherited through his father's stories. These recollections are crucial for the boy's understanding of his identity and the values he should uphold. The Father's recalling the past gradually becomes a moral guide, as seen when he emphasizes carrying "the fire," a metaphor for maintaining human decency and hope amidst the bleakness: "Yes, you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (193).

Yonatan Englender and Elana Gomel consider *The Road* as a post-apocalyptic world of science fiction, but they argue what gives the book a realistic outlook and forces it out of the boundaries of science fiction, is the realistic depiction of pre-apocalypse world through the memories of the Father. The son, lacking direct access to memories of the past, can only see glimpses of it through his father's stories. This creates a significant gap between the two of them, as the son's understanding is limited and shaped by his father's accounts, rather than his own firsthand experiences.

In a post-apocalyptic world, the gap between those who lived before the apocalyptic event and those who live after, here the gap between the man and his son, is as wide as that which exists between different worlds, as one might find in countless science fictions stories—'Maybe [the man] understood for the first time that to the boy he himself was an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect'. (Englender and Gomel 15)

The boy's lack of direct memories of the world before the apocalypse means he must rely on his father's accounts to form a vision of what humanity can aspire to. This transmission of memory is crucial for the boy's moral development. As the father says, "You have my whole heart. You always did. You're the best guy. You always were. If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I'll talk to you. You'll see" (193). This promise serves as an emphasis on the enduring power of memory, even in the face of total collapse.

Memory as a Narrative Structure

In *The Road*, McCarthy employs memory not just as a thematic device but also as a narrative structure. The fragmented nature of the father's recollections mirrors the fragmented state of the world they navigate. These flashbacks and memories provide readers with glimpses of the pre-apocalyptic world, creating a sense of loss and longing that permeates the narrative.

For example, the father's memory of a fishing trip with his uncle provides a stark contrast to their current struggle for survival: "Once in those early years he'd wakened in a barren wood and lay listening to flocks of migratory birds overhead in that bitter dark. Their half mute calls like the cries of souls broken away" (35). This recollection underscores the drastic transformation of the world and the enduring impact of those memories on the father's psyche.

Memory and the Human Experience

Memory in *The Road* underscores the human experience, illustrating how recollections of the past shape characters' present actions and future aspirations. McCarthy suggests that in the face of societal collapse, it is the persistence of memory that upholds the remains of humanity. The Father's memories serve as a reminder of what once was, and what could potentially be reclaimed or rebuilt, even if it seems an almost impossible task. Pugh in her article "There is no God and we are his prophets": The Visionary Potential of



Memory and Nostalgia in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* ", discusses the helpful functions of memory and nostalgia and states: "The past itself acts as the voice of guidance, and rather than limiting their perspective, their anxiety in the present drives them to this search for revelation and prophetic guidance in the past" (2).

The Father's memories of pre-apocalyptic life provide a vision of what humanity could return to, even if such a return seems impossible: "Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counter spectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hidrotic and coldly secular. The silence" (189). This vision of the world's former glory strengthens the father's determination to protect his son.

In a post-apocalyptic world, memories and the ability to remember can be a powerful source of motivation, identity, and hope for the protagonists. However, the harsh and dramatically altered nature of this environment gradually diminishes the strength and resilience of those memories. Even the recollections that once sustained the characters start to fade away little by little, as the undeniable realities of the post-apocalyptic landscape slowly demolish the hold that the past has on the present.

Despite the initial benefits that memories provide, the extreme conditions of this new world wear down their significance and meaning. The memories that once offered comfort, direction, and a sense of self identity, become increasingly fragile and elusive. The protagonists must confront a reality where even the solace of the past is not immune to the corrosive effects of the apocalypse. Gradually, the memories that once seemed so vital and enduring lose their power, leaving the characters to grapple with a world where the past is no longer a reliable anchor. As the father ponders upon how he can possibly "enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own" (106). This highlights how he experiences a philosophical dilemma regarding the fading memories and the necessity of passing them on to the boy or let them vanish.

As it is within the nature of a post-apocalyptic world to make previous memories vanish, paradoxically, it creates new sorts of memories through the very heart of the ruins. Mavri in his article "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* Revisited: Memory and Language in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction" argues, "post-apocalyptic fiction thus reaches an inevitable impasse; something always remains "after the end" and that remnant—rubble, mummified corpses, water-soaked books, a can of Coca Cola—evokes the past, reverses the ruin, and animates memory" (8).

Memory in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

The world of *The Handmaid's tale* is not much different from that of *The Road* in the sense of division created between a previous world and a present world after some kind of disaster. Although one is natural and one is mostly societal, both books craft worlds that have been through drastic horrifying alternations. In this regard the role of memory is also worth noting in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In this book, memory and remembering play a vital role in the protagonist's resistance against the oppressive regime of Gilead. The protagonist, Offred, frequently reflects on her past life, using her memories as a form of silent rebellion and a source of strength. These recollections of her former freedom, relationships, and identity act as a form of passive resistance against the severe restrictions and dehumanizing conditions imposed by the Gileadean authorities. By holding onto these memories, Offred is able to maintain a sense of self and individuality that the regime seeks to erase.

Offred's memories become a source of strength, allowing her to mentally escape the harshness of her present circumstances and cling to the hope of a better life that once was. In the face of the regime's attempts to control and instruct the handmaids, Offred's act of remembering functions as a powerful, subversive act, a means of preserving her humanity and an implicit refusal to fully convert to Gilead's oppressive vision. Through Offred's internal reflection on her past, Atwood demonstrates how memory can serve as a vital tool of resistance, enabling the protagonist to sustain her spirit and sense of self in the midst of a dystopian reality that seeks to strip her of both. Offred's memories become a source of resilience,



allowing her to mentally and emotionally resist the totalitarian control of the Gilead regime.

Memory as Resistance

Offred's memories of her life before Gilead, when she had autonomy, a family, and a career, serve as a mental refuge and a form of resistance. These recollections are acts of defiance, preserving her sense of self in a society that seeks to erase individual identity. She recalls mundane details with a sense of significance, such as her relationship with her husband Luke: "We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up" (20). These memories sustain her, reminding her of who she was and who she aspires to be again.

Offred's memories also include her daughter, whom she was separated from. These memories are painful yet crucial for her survival: "I try to conjure, to raise my own spirits from the dead, resurrect myself. I think about Laundromats. What I wore to them" (173). Gradually, the act of remembering becomes a form of silent rebellion, a way to mentally escape Gilead's oppressive grasp. Hilde Staels in her article "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Resistance through narrating" discusses the significance of memory in the narration of the book, she states:

The absolutist regime wants to abolish the past. Yet Offred re-enacts the past in the present. Her memory of the past brings back to life the excluded pole in Gilead, such as the existence of love and humanity. Offred's act of retracing the lost connection with her roots in the process of life is a desire to escape from the trap of paralysis and defeatism. It is an act of survival that saves her from despair and that resurrects the missing part of herself. (460)

Offred by remembering her life before Gilead, keeps fragments of that life alive and those fragments function as microcosms of all lives before the Gilead and such sense of history or dreams of a previously better life are the fundamental parts that the regime wants vanished and forgotten.

Memory and Identity

The loss of one's history brings about the loss of identity. Therefore, resisting on preserving one's history by the act of remembering, inevitably could result in the preservation of one's identity. Staels states that Gilead intentionally aims at people forgetting the past and the history, as forgetting implicitly causes the loss of one's true identity and once lost, the people become easier targets of surveillance and control. She highlights:

Offred moves back through layers of history, opens the wounds and retraces the loss. Pain is still possible because of memory, and memory is what the narrator tries to keep alive. The destruction of memory, which Gilead aims at, involves a numbing of the site of personal desire and creative energy. (463)

In a society that assigns women roles that strip away their former identities, memory becomes a crucial tool for maintaining a sense of self. Offred's recollections of her daughter and her former life are acts of preservation against Gilead's attempts to redefine her solely as a Handmaid: "I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day" (72). Remembering her true name and her past acts as a rebellion against her imposed identity.

Offred's memories also serve as a guide for maintaining her moral compass in a society that perverts moral and ethical norms. "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum," a mock-Latin phrase she discovers scratched in her room, symbolizes the resistance of previous Handmaids and becomes a mantra for her: "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (79). This phrase connects her to a legacy of defiance and serves as a reminder of her inner strength and resilience.



Memory as a Form of Storytelling and Legacy

Offred's narrative is constructed through a series of flashbacks and memories, emphasizing the importance of storytelling as a means of survival and legacy. Her act of remembering is also an act of bearing witness, ensuring that the horrors of Gilead are not forgotten: "I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it" (34). Through her memories, she resists the erasure of history imposed by the regime, asserting the importance of remembering both for personal sanity and historical record. It also helps her to come to accepting the present circumstances which is necessary for her mental survival. Andrew Liu in his article "Memory, Absence, and Aporia in *The Handmaid's Tale*" points out how Offred's memories of her mom demonstrate her resistance through narration. He says:

One aspect of Offred's narrative which demonstrates her resistance to the authoritarian ideology of Gilead is her journey towards accepting her mother.... Her eventual acceptance of her mother is in line with her struggle against the dystopian present through the process of remembering the past. (36)

These memories provide a fragmented but powerful narrative that challenges Gilead's attempts to control the story. By recounting her experiences, Offred not only preserves her own identity but also contributes to a collective memory that could eventually lead to the regime's downfall while forgetting could cause more oppression. "They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way" (100). This act of narration underscores the critical role of memory in resisting totalitarian control and preserving human dignity.

3. CONCLUSION

Both McCarthy's and Atwood's works depict memory as a double-edged sword in post-apocalyptic/dystopian settings, essential for maintaining a connection to a lost world, yet often a source of grave pain. In both novels, memories provide a moral compass. In *The Road*, the father's memories guide him in teaching his son about the "fire" of human decency. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's memories of her past life uphold her sense of justice and individual worth, motivating her to survive and resist.

Furthermore, memory in both novels underscores the human experience, illustrating how recollections of the past shape characters' present actions and future aspirations. McCarthy and Atwood suggest that in the face of societal collapse, it is the persistence of memory that upholds the remains of humanity. The Father's and Offred's memories serve as a reminder of what once was, and what could potentially be reclaimed or rebuilt, even if it seems an almost insurmountable task.

In *The Road*, the father's memories of pre-apocalyptic life provide a vision of what humanity could return to, even if such a return seems impossible:

His dreams brightened. The vanished world returned... He thought of his life. So long ago. A gray day in a foreign city where he stood in a window and watched the street below. Behind him on a wooden table a small lamp burned. On the table books and papers. It had begun to rain and a cat at the corner turned and crossed the sidewalk and sat beneath the café awning. (129)

This vision of the world's former peace and liveliness fuels the father's determination to protect his son.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's memories of a world where women had rights and freedoms drive her silent rebellion: "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories" (49). This assertion of existence in the gaps of the official narrative highlights the power of memory to preserve individual identity and resistance.



These novels illustrate how memory serves as a vital link to the past, a source of hope and despair, and a tool for resistance and identity preservation in the face of apocalyptic or dystopian devastation. Through their respective narratives, McCarthy and Atwood underscore the enduring power of memory to sustain the human spirit and provide a moral compass in even the bleakest of worlds.

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