

**CHARACTERS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM NOVEL AND  
POST-POSTMODERNISM WITH REFERENCE TO  
*THE ROAD* BY CORMAC MCCARTHY AND  
*THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF*  
*OSCAR WAO* BY JUNOT DIAZ**

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134-FLL/MSENG/F09



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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
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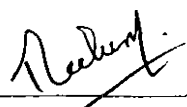
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IIUI

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I certify that all the material in this thesis borrowed from other sources has been identified and that no material is included for which a degree has previously been conferred upon anybody.

Dated: December 28, 2011.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

*All that I am*

*All that I hope to be*

*I owe to my father*

## Acceptance by the *Viva Voce* Committee

**Title of the thesis:** Characters in the New Millennium Novel and Post-postmodernism with Reference to *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz.

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## ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to investigate how far the notions of postmodernism still account for the human condition in the contemporary world and also to explore how far and in what terms have we moved forward from the postmodern ideas. To investigate into this issue the study analyzes the major characters of the selected novels *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Junot Diaz. Postmodernism is a comprehensive theory covering numerous aspects of life, the study looks at the selected aspects of postmodernism in characters: Characters' views on meta-narratives, their observance of the limitations and boundaries in the world around them, their optimism and feelings of nostalgia. The conclusions which are drawn from the analysis reveal that the characters in both the novels subscribe to the metanarratives of religion, good and bad, love, patriarchy /matriarchy, social conduct, storytelling, machismo, romanticism and family curse. The divisions and boundaries between right and wrong, man and boy, life and death, survival and savagery, male and female, local and outsider, regular and nerd are also preserved. There is not much evidence of breakdown or blurring of boundaries or distinctions in the characters' world. The characters do not appear to rejoice in the chaos in the world neither are they hopeless. They exhibit optimism even in the face of chaos. However they are not nostalgic or rely on the memory of the past to derive comfort in the present. The study shows how McCarthy and Diaz's characters resist many of the postmodern assumptions about human existence that have come to shape our understanding of human life in recent times. The study and its findings support the notions of the theorists who assert that we should now begin to look beyond postmodernism.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Statement of the Problem	4
1.2. Research Questions	5
1.3. Significance of the Study	5
1.4. Methodology	6
<b>CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1. Postmodernism	9
2.1.1. Basic Tenets of Postmodernism	12
2.1.2. Postmodern Novel : Key Features	15
2.2. After Postmodernism—Post-postmodernism	18
2.2.1. Post-postmodern Novel : Key Features	23
2.2.2 Characters in the Postmodern and Post-postmodern Novel	28
2.3. <i>The Road</i> and <i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i>	33
<b>CHAPTER 3 RELIGION AND PATRIARCHY A ROAD THROUGH CHAOS</b>	<b>37</b>
3.1. Characters' Adherence to Metanarratives	38
3.1.1. Religion	39
3.1.2. Notion of Good and Bad	47
3.1.3. Love	50
3.1.4. Patriarchy	51
3.1.5. Social Conduct	53
3.1.6. Storytelling and Naming	54
3.2. Breakdown of Boundaries in the Characters World	55



3.2.1. Good / Bad	55
3.2.2. Man / Boy	57
3.2.3. Survival / Savagery	58
3.2.4. Life / Death	59
3.3. Nostalgia and Optimism	60
<b>CHAPTER 4 VOWS AGAINST SOCIAL AND IDEATIONAL BOUNDARIES</b>	<b>68</b>
4.1. Characters' Adherence to Metanarratives	68
4.1.1. Masculinity/Machismo	68
4.1.2. Violence	76
4.1.3. Fantasy Novels, Comics and Romanticism	78
4.1.4. Love	80
4.1.5. Matriarchy and Family	86
4.1.6. Family Curse and Superstition	89
4.2. Breakdown of Boundaries	93
4.2.1. Local / Outsider	93
4.2.2. Regular / Nerd	94
4.2.3. Male / Female	95
4.3. Nostalgia and Optimism	97
<b>CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION</b>	<b>101</b>
5.1. Metanarratives	102
5.1.1. <i>The Road</i>	102
5.1.2. <i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i>	104
5.2. Breakdown of Boundaries	105

5.2.1. <i>The Road</i>	105
5.2.2 <i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i>	107
5.3. Nostalgia and Optimism	108
5.3.1. <i>The Road</i>	108
5.3.2. <i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i>	108
5.4. Recommendations	109
5.5. Conclusion	110
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	112

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Expressions in art and literature are not merely fashionable pursuits, but markers of a profound evolution in our vision of the world and our way of inhabiting it and these expressions change as the world and our perception of the world change hence the continuous trickle of literary theories that attempt to explain the world we inhabit. One such theory that defines the literature produced from the 1960's to 1990's is referred to as Postmodernism.

In the field of literary studies the term postmodernism has received widest usage and most vexed discussion. Since the study explores the extent to which the term postmodernism has been implicated in fiction it is important to look at the set of characteristics, which emerged in the fiction during 1960's Cold War environment. Much postmodern fiction is inundated with aesthetic representations of commodities and mass media entertainment; hence postmodern fiction's fascination with artifice, animated as it frequently is by a desire to subvert the elitism of modernist high culture.

Tim Woods refers to postmodern fiction as "a fiction defined by negatives and absences" (51). The term 'postmodern' gradually moved during the 1970's and 1980's to describe those works which also embodied within them explicit critiques of

late capitalist society. It includes Pynchon, DeLillo and Paul Auster's novels. In the late 80's and 90's it was applied to fiction, which reflects the social ethos of late capitalism, like cyberpunk and sci-fi.

The studies of contemporary critics such as McHale, Smith and Kirby point to the idea that as a critical concept, postmodernism outlived its usefulness sometime in the mid-1990s. In an accelerated fashion, the term accumulated the same proliferation of definitions as modernism itself. Moreover they claim that many of the themes that critics associated with postmodernism such as hybridity, pluralism and relativism became well-worn critical clichés and also part of the unconscious ideology of the humanities. Brian McHale argues in his article that it is now common to speak of postmodernism in the past-tense, as an exhausted movement that has given way to an as yet undefined post-postmodern sensibility. Alan Kirby states that under the influence of new technologies and contemporary social forces a new paradigm of knowledge and authority has formed its place which he labels as, "digimodernism". The emergence of new technologies in the late 1990's and 2000's, reconstructed permanently and quite violently, the function and nature of author, reader and text (1-2). Therefore, in this context, new studies of fiction produced after the nineties face the need to establish new categories and to structure different strategies for grouping together and reading postmodern texts.

Fekete in his book *Life After Postmodernism* (1988), discusses the notion of value in the postmodern scene. He feels that in this era after postmodernism the world is standing on "threshold of a new value debate in contemporary politics, aesthetics, and society" (8). Brian McHale titles his essay on postmodernism in the past tense: *What was Postmodernism?* to emphasize that postmodernism is a thing of the past. He

cites Federman's novel to argue on this idea. Raymond Federman in his novel *Aunt Rachel's Fur* (2001), talks about the death of postmodernism through a character.

The proclamation of the demise of postmodernism can be read in Thomas Pynchon's novel *Against the Day* (2007) in which he talks about the death of the world that we know i.e. the death of postmodernism. He is of the view that Postmodernism was always a temporary arrangement and from the very outset it knew that it would one day be over. The events of September eleven signal the end of postmodernism because these events changed our perception of ourselves as well as the world we live in.

The inspiration for the research came from Brian McHale's essay on postmodernism in the past tense: *What was Postmodernism?*, in which he emphasizes that postmodernism is a thing of the past. He asserts that many signs imply that the historical period defined and dominated by postmodernism is coming to an end (What Was Postmodernism). Multiculturalism and the discourse of identity is being overtaken and dominated by a planetary movement of creolisation; cultural relativism and deconstruction, substituted for modernist universalism, which leave us unarmed against "the twofold threat of uniformity and mass culture and traditionalist, far-right, withdrawal" (Bourriaud).

Much of the focus in the study of contemporary literature is on the style and themes of the novels. There is a need to investigate the nature of the characters that appear in novels, what ideals the characters hold and how do they view the world that they inhabit. The present study endeavors to fill this gap. Since we assume that the novels in the new millennium signal a shift in trends, it will be interesting and enlightening to see what particular traits do the characters in these novels exhibit, whether they follow the postmodernist view or challenge it.

We are perhaps living in a time and era wherein a postmodern perspective about the self or subject is more or less accepted and has started to function as a cultural norm. It cannot be generalized that every person living in this world has a postmodern sense of self. Postmodern ideas have gained dominance and have been accepted by people as governing our lives and thought. There seems to be agreement over the idea that we have entered a postmodern era and it is considered almost impossible to look beyond this perspective. In the wake of recent events, especially the attack on the World Trade Centre, intellectuals and theorists have started to look at it as a turning point, marking a change in how we think of our *selves*, our identity and in how we interpret our experience in the world (Timmer 29). The world is continually metamorphosing and literary theories evolve to keep up with this ever-changing world. A theory which was able to explain the world at a given point in time cannot be expected to hold true for all times to come. Postmodernism was used to describe the human condition adequately at one time but the world has kept on changing and now with the turn of the century it has become necessary to see if postmodernism is a valid description of the world today. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since the start of postmodernism and its prime in the 80s. The world we occupy and the world postmodernist philosophy tries to explain has changed. Now we click, punch, swipe our way through life. From the cold war we have come to the USA as the sole super power, from resisting communism we have come to fighting terrorists. 9/11 has changed the very core of the world we inhabit. All these indicate to one thing: the world has changed and so must any explanation of the world.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

The present study is an attempt to see how far do the notions of postmodernism account for the human condition in the contemporary world and also

to explore to what extent and in what terms have we moved forward from the postmodern ideas. The study thus seeks to determine if characters in the novels written after the millennium have adopted a postmodern view of the world or they are moving towards adopting a new perspective i.e. post-postmodernism.

### **1.2. Research Questions**

- a. How far do characters subscribe to meta-narratives and do they challenge the metanarratives of religion, culture, love etc?
- b. How prevalent is the postmodernist breakdown of boundaries in the characters' lives and to what extent religion, gender, good and evil are watertight compartments?
- c. How far do the Characters appear to have an optimistic view of the world and do they long for the stability of the past (nostalgia)?

### **1.3. Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study lies in that that it questions what has come to be considered as a cultural norm i.e. postmodernism is alive and kicking. Because of the assumption that postmodernist theory is contemporary and that contemporary fiction is postmodernist there is a need to find newer elements in fiction, elements that flout postmodernist characteristics. The present study is an attempt to fill this gap in existing literature, which offers no counter view to the assumption that fiction is postmodern. The study is also significant because it moves beyond a mere description, it tries to explain and predict elements. It seeks to know why the postmodernist characteristics are not there and also what can we expect in the future. It attempts to predict the nature of characters in fiction we can expect in the next decade.

#### 1.4. Methodology

The study is a descriptive textual analysis. In this qualitative study a close analysis of the characters is carried out from the postmodernist perspective in order to analyze if the characters adhere to the postmodernist thought or not. The research applies the theory of postmodernism on two novels; *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Junot Diaz. The study has devised its methodological framework by drawing upon the theory of Postmodernism and analyzing the major characters against the major ideas of the theory to reach its conclusion. This leads to a prediction as to what sort of characters readers can expect in the novels in the coming years. Hence the study is not only descriptive it is also explanatory and analytical.

The study aims to work with novels written in the first decade of the new millennium. This is not to suggest that the change of date brought a radical change. This is only to mark a clear-cut point of reference. The study with its limited scope and time available has to be confined to a small number of novels. To do this the study aims to look at award winning novels of the decade. Since the study seeks to find out the attitudes and perspectives of the characters in fiction studying only a single novel would not have fully served the purpose. Analyzing the characters in two novels would help in making the generalizations about the views and attitudes of the characters that appear in the contemporary novel.

Within the broader framework of Postmodernism the study examines the views of the major characters regarding the Postmodernist notions of metanarratives and breakdown of boundaries in the characters' world. It also examines whether the characters hold an optimistic view of the world or they are nostalgic and long for the stability of the past. The framework of the study is developed on the basis of the ideas



postulated by the proponents of postmodernism. The study takes into account Lyotard's assertion that the era is marked by the demise of "grand histories" or an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv) hence leading to anti-foundationalism. He asserts that there is disillusionment with total explanations of reality such as those offered by science, religion and political programs.

In *The Road* the unnamed father is the protagonist whose actions and thoughts are analyzed against the postmodernist ideas to find out whether he follows the postmodernist or not. Along with the father the son is another character whose actions and thoughts are observed to see what views he carries regarding postmodernist notions. The study observes in detail their views on metanarratives of religion, good and bad, love, patriarchy, social conduct, story telling and naming; their observance of boundaries between good and bad, man and boy, survival and savagery, life and death; their feeling of optimism and nostalgia.

Oscar is the protagonist in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. His views on metanarratives of machismo, love, violence, romance, family curse and superstition; his views on the breakdown or observance of boundaries between male female, nerd regular, local outsider and his optimism and feelings of nostalgia are analyzed in great detail to find out whether he observes the postmodernist view of the self and the world or adheres to post-postmodernist thought. Oscar's sister Lola's views and actions are also analyzed in order to discern whether her world view is dominated by postmodern or post-postmodernist ideas.

The postmodern theory forms the basis for analysis of the characters' views and beliefs for the study. The study seeks to verify the hypothesis whether the characters hold postmodernist views or have moved beyond postmodernism which is

termed as post-postmodernism. It will help a good deal in drawing ideas about what type of characters to expect in the novels to come.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter presents an introduction to postmodernism and the literary trends in the novel after postmodernism and states briefly the basic tenets proposed by the leading theorists of both the schools. The review will give an insight into the major divergences as well as the similarities between postmodern and post-postmodern novel, which will lead to the understanding of the representation of characters in post-postmodern novel. The review is divided into four sections; the first details the theory of postmodernism and key features of postmodern novel, the second presents trends in novel after postmodernism (post-postmodernism), the third and the fourth sections respectively present relevant research done on the post-postmodern novel in general and characters in post-postmodern novel in particular, including the literature available on the two novels under study.

#### **2.1. Postmodernism**

Postmodernism is a set of practices in arts and literature that emerged during the 1950's and dominated many disciplines in art till 1980's. Bertens and Natoli observe that on a more theoretical level postmodernism presents a set of philosophical propositions which reject realist epistemology, deny the autonomous

self-identical subject, transparency of language, accessibility to reality and possibility of universal foundation (xii).

Postmodernism is related to the term "modernism". Many theorists opine that postmodern perspective is that which comes after or develops from modernist thought. Bauman regards Postmodernity as "modernity conscious of its true nature" (187). In other words it is self-reflective mood within modernity. As Tim Woods explains, "Postmodernism is a knowing modernism ... a modernism that does not agonize about itself. Postmodernism does what modernism does, only in celebratory rather than repentant way" (8). Postmodernism rejects all boundaries and divisions. This rejection also includes the boundaries between different forms and genres of art; examples can be bricolage and pastiche. Postmodernism rejects boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejects rigid division between genres, and emphasizes pastiche, parody, irony and playfulness (Klages 65). Postmodernism favors reflexivity in thought and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity in narrative structures, ambiguity and simultaneity. The presentation of a destructured, decentered and dehumanized subject is emphasized. Postmodernism appears very much like modernism in these aspects but it differs from modernism in its attitude toward a number of these trends. Modernism tends to present a fragmented view of human subjectivity, Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922) and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) are the most apt examples, and that fragmentation is presented as bad and tragic, something to be lamented and mourned as a loss. Many modernist works uphold the idea that art and literature can provide the unity, coherence, and meaning which to a great extent has disappeared from modern life; art can do what other human institutions could not succeed to do. Postmodernism, in contrast, doesn't lament the

idea of fragmentation, incoherence, provisionality or disorder, but it celebrates that (Fortney and Onellion 262).

Postmodernism focuses on fragmentation, discontinuity, disorder and ambiguity. Postmodern writings concentrate on the presentation of a de-structured and de-centered humanity. The ideas of disorder and fragmentation, which were previously viewed as negative attributes, are considered acceptable representations of reality by postmodernists (Smith).

Postmodernism has emerged from an allegiance to the poststructuralist attack on ideas of stable linguistic meaning and existence of objective reality. The basic attitude that postmodernism displays is skepticism about the claims of any kind of overall totalizing and final explanations (Hassan 64; Lodge 42; McHale; Mepham 138). The skepticism about commitments to master narratives promoted by Lyotard and echoed by Derrida and many other postmodernists had a strong appeal to the subordinated and the marginalized subjects (Butler 15).

The disjointed and fragmented view of human life in modernism was considered as awful or tragic, while in postmodernism this apparently meaningless view of the world is celebrated. It is an acknowledgment of the disorder and chaos that promotes a play with meaning. Postmodernism accepts uncertainty and ambiguity as reasonable and realistic. Things and events can have two or more meanings at the same time. Postmodernists believe that a rigid, rational, logocentric or linear approach attempts to avoid or reduce ambiguity. Postmodern thought perceives concurrent views not as contradictory but as essential parts of the complex patterning of life and reality (Woods 50-53).

From the preceding discussion it can be summarized that postmodern thought is an adventure and an expression of experiences of life. It is an attempt to

question the world around us and especially not to take other people's views as the final truth. Postmodernism puts everything into question and radically interrogates already accepted and practiced philosophies, strategies and world views.

### **2.1.1. Basic Tenets of Postmodernism**

Since postmodernism is a very comprehensive theory that encompasses a variety of ideas and practices, I will limit my discussion on the general characteristics of postmodern literary theory to the ideas that my research explores. Therefore, below is given some of the basic tenets of postmodernism which the study seeks to evaluate in the post-postmodern novel.

Postmodern criticism is interested in drawing connection between what is found in the text with social reality. Jean Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979 trans1984) argues that the condition of postmodernity is one of "incredulity towards meta-narratives"(Lyotard xxiv) towards those grand, universal, or master narratives upon which modernity stands, but which are now considered "stories that we tell ourselves to convince ourselves of their truth" (Bertens and Natoli 247) rather than the conceptual foundations which are empirically verifiable that possess the authority to hold things together. In postmodern philosophy, a metanarrative is an untold story that unifies and totalizes the world, and justifies a culture's power structures. Examples of these stories are nationalisms, Marxism, religion, science and the idea of progress. Metanarratives are not usually told outright, but are reinforced by other more specific narratives told within the culture. In the postmodern world, universal, overarching explanatory systems and ideologies such as, enlightenment scientific rationality, capitalist or Marxist economic theory, the Christian or Freudian view of the human psyche/soul are seen as narratives that lack credibility and adequacy (Shaffer 7). Lyotard claims that these all-encompassing

systems have been replaced with a plurality to more credible if limited "petit recits" (60) or discrete micro-narratives of only provisional and particular applicability.

According to Lyotard totality stability, and order are maintained in modern societies through grand narratives or master narratives, which are stories a culture states itself and about its beliefs and practices. In postmodern philosophy, a metanarrative is an untold story that unifies and totalizes the world, and justifies a culture's power structures. Postmodernism has been described as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). Metanarratives are not usually told outright, but are reinforced by other more specific narratives told within the culture. A grand narrative in American culture can be the story that democracy is the most rational and enlightened form of government, and that democracy may lead to universal happiness of humanity. All systems of belief or ideologies have their grand narratives, according to Lyotard; for Marxism, for instance, the grand narrative is the idea that capitalism will collapse in on itself and a utopian socialist world will emerge. The grand narrative can be taken as a kind of meta-theory, or meta-ideology or an ideology that expounds on ideology such as with Marxism. Lyotard argues that all aspects of modern societies, including science as the primary form of knowledge, depend on these grand narratives. Postmodernism then is the critique of these established grand narratives, the awareness that such narratives work as pretense the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social practice or organization. It can be said that all efforts to create order demand the construction of an equal sum of "disorder", but a "grand narrative" covers the constructedness of these categories by explaining that "disorder" is in fact unpleasant and chaotic, and "order" is rational and good (Klages 169).

The postmodernist thought that rejects objective truths is influenced to a great extent by the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Derrida, one of the chief exponents of post-structuralism, coined the term “deconstruction” which means a philosophical method of looking for weak points in modern thinking and established ways of perception. The master narratives or established viewpoints are scrutinized for inconsistencies or fissures. The central argument of deconstruction depends on relativism—the view that truth itself is always relative to the differing standpoints. All conceptual frame works if seen in this way, can be criticized. This is Derrida’s vital contribution to postmodernist thought. He sees all conceptual systems as prone to distorting “hierarchization” (Butler 19). Deconstruction bends its efforts to stretch beyond boundaries, to transgress all confinements. The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things—texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs and practices do not have definite meanings and determined missions. One of the main characteristics of postmodern thinking is that the world is seen as a complex and an uncertain place. Reality is no longer fixed or determined. Within a postmodern context all truth is relative to one’s perspective. The world is a representation, more specifically it is just a fiction—a story created from a specific point of view and is not a final truth (Derrida and Caputo 32).

Jean Baudrillard defines post-modernity as an “age of simulation” and “hyper-reality” (68) in which the actual and its representation are impossible to distinguish, and in which representations therefore can only be understood to refer to other representations and not to say any underlying reality. Baudrillard considers that we have lost all sense of authenticity and are living in a world of simulation that we helplessly take as reality. In his *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard holds that the postmodern world—unlike the modern one which is structured around the idea



of production and consumption of commodities, is organized around simulation and the play of images and signs and in it hyperreality constructed in the virtual world of free-floating images and mediatized events, has become the only knowable reality. Baudrillard asserts that the hyperreal provides more involving and intense experience than the picture of ordinary everyday life, which he calls the “desert of the real” (1).

For Jean Francois Lyotard all aspects of modern societies depend on the grand narratives. Postmodernism is the critique of grand narratives—an assertion that such narratives serve as a pretence to the contradictions and instabilities inherent in beliefs and social practices. Derrida furthers Lyotard’s anti-foundationalism by claiming that the master narratives or established beliefs are examined for inconsistencies and contradictions. The idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears. In postmodern societies, there are only surfaces, without depth. Baudrillard’s claim that we live in hyperreality, which we take as real, also affirms the postmodernist notion where the idea of stable reality disappears.

### **2.1.2 Postmodern Novel: Key Features**

Postmodernism in literature according to Gerald Graff has been characterized as a ‘breakthrough’ a significant reversal of the dominant literary trends and modes (217). He points out two dominant strains within the general complex attitude of postmodern writings—the apocalyptic and the visionary. The first strain is dominated by the sense of death of literature, acknowledging its futility. It manifests itself in the form of “literature of silence”, which breaks itself from the traditions of romanticism and modernism. The second strain expresses hopefulness for revolutionary changes out of the ruins of the old sensibility. It

attempts a break from the past as well as envisioning a revolutionary future (217-19).

Tim Woods summarizes the key characteristics of postmodern fiction, which throws light on how it differs from the modernist fiction and what experiments have been done in its representation under the postmodernist cultural climate.

- Preoccupation with possibility of systems or representation,
- Inclusion of multiple fictive selves
- Fragmented and self-reflective narrative
- Challenging conventions of literary realism
- Questioning the relationship of narrative and subjectivity
- Elimination of boundaries between high and low forms of art
- “displacement of real by simulacra” (66).

McHale describes the concerns of postmodern writings as ontological rather than epistemological “the shift of dominant from problems of knowing to problems of modes of being” (10). Tim Woods argues that postmodernism explores the contradictions and contingencies of high and pop cultures and is motivated by self assertion of non hegemonic forces and “decentring of traditional notion of subjectivity” (58).

In the American postmodernist novel we encounter an all-pervasive cynicism, which places all existing beliefs in crisis. This postmodernist theme aptly reflects Lyotard’s definition of postmodernity as characterized by “incredulity towards metanarratives” (xiv). The American contemporary novel reflects a world stripped away of certainties, values and even meaning. Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1964) and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) vividly evoke such a world. Both novels present a hero who is disadvantaged and definitely undistinguished, unable to

transcend obstacles and circumstances in a situation where there seems to be no hope of redemption or escape. The key characteristics are usually fragmentation, loss, distrust of authority, and lack of universal truths.

Raymond Wilson in an essay *Postmodern Novel* suggests a no-conclusive list of the characteristics of Postmodern novel: a tendency to reuse many of the earlier forms in a "literature of exhaustion and replenishment" (Barth 1); "a zone of the bizarre" where our sense of reality is best expressed through fantasy; a turning away from saturation into the psychological depth of character as the objective of fiction; and a proclivity for metafiction, where the text draws attention to the techniques and methods of its own creation. Robert Scholes' prediction that the key element in the coming new fiction would be a new dimension of the "care for form" (41), a tendency toward meta-fiction, also supports Wilson's assertion. Hans Bertens tells us that postmodern writing is apolitical, evasive and self absorbed. It is concerned more with form and relies excessively on irony (43). Bertens further points out to the major dominant features of novel from pre-modernism to postmodernism calling continuity of plot a feature of pre-modern fiction, analysis of character a feature of modernist fiction and operation of motifs and symbols as the dominant feature of postmodern fiction (54). This also compensates for the flatness of characters in the postmodern novel and also serves as "motor oil for the postmodern fictional machine" (Wilson).

John Barth, in *The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction* (1967) presents his "worthy program" and expects that the postmodern mode of writing may become a fiction "more democratic in its appeal" than the wonders of late modern fiction, moving ahead of the "professional devotees of high art" (Klein 70). Linda Hutcheon's remarks also support Barth's assertion about the democratic spirit of the

postmodern writings. She states that postmodern writing "...asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control, and identity ... that have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism" (Hutcheon 5). She regards postmodern fiction as interrogative and instructive. It reveals the past constructed always in ideological and discursive terms. It is a fiction concerned both with its status as fiction (language and narrative) and grounded also in historical facts (8).

. According to Jameson postmodern discourse acts as "the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses ... must make their way" (57). In the principal characteristics of postmodern discourse he includes the loss of separate and unique individual identity or self due to the waning of feeling, a "peculiar kind of euphoria" mixed with a loss of memory, a celebration of surfaces which denies the hermeneutics of depth and nostalgia. Jameson regards "flatness or depthlessness" as "the supreme feature of all postmodernisms". Postmodernism attempts to bring the dissimilar elements closer to impose an overall identity on radically different or contrasting ideas or people (60-77).

## **2.2 After Postmodernism—Post-postmodernism**

We cannot mark clear cut divisions between transition from one literary movement to another nor can we say that as one era ends as a period in history, so do the literary trends. When we talk about 'after Postmodernism' it implies that what new trends and ideas are followed in the contemporary literature that suggests a movement away or divergence from the postmodern literary trends. Let us first look at the ideas of some of the figures who reject to view the contemporary era as a continuation of Postmodernism and believe that the contemporary epoch is Post-postmodern. It will help us understand the basic ideas that they associate with the

post-postmodern writing. Many contemporary theorists and novelists believe that postmodernism has run its course and as a literary theory exhausted itself. Just as postmodernism stemmed from modernism, carrying further some of its basic ideas and at the same time rebelling against some, Post-postmodern thinking too accepts and extends certain postmodern thoughts and rejects some, devising some new modes of representation. Fiction is concerned with new modes of representation of human life and reality which keep changing as our ways of looking at reality and commenting on it change. The term postmodernism was extended and strengthened in order to analyze the present so that "the postmodern highlights what is singular and original in the contemporary era". The contemporary era is the period of "new modernity", a new "postmodern adventure" (Best and Douglas 2). For the analysis of the postmodern novel, Hoffman asserts that the term "realism" was introduced in order to describe the return to traditional forms of narrative and storytelling. The phrase "neo-realism" suggests that the adoption of realist modes of representation of celebrating the new as progress in the arts, the rebirth of realism is considered as a new stage of advance in literature, as the arrival of common sense (622-3).

Best and Kneller state that the "postmodernist art was more surface oriented, renouncing depth and grand philosophical or moral vision" (132). Samuel R. Smith dates it from early 20th century to the 1960s. The next age he says would naturally be post-postmodernism. He further asserts that "The world is turning into a rather confusing place in many ways, turning into a society that has stopped building and is dynamiting the foundations on which it is built" (Smith).

Bourriard calls the present age a promising time for the re-composition of modernity according to the specific context within which we live—the age of globalization—understood in its economic, political and cultural aspects: an

altermodernity ("Altermodern Manifesto"). John Fekete in his book *Life After Postmodernism* (1988) discusses the notion of value in the postmodern scene. He feels that in this era after postmodernism the world is standing on a 'threshold of a new value debate in contemporary politics, aesthetics, and society' (Fekete ii).

Brian McHale in his essay *What was Postmodernism?* cites Federman's novel to argue for his point. Raymond Federman in his novel *Aunt Rachel's Fur* (2001) talks about the death of postmodernism through a character—an aspiring novelist whose work is rejected for being too postmodern says to the editor:

So you find my [...] novel too postmodern, wrong again Gaston, you've arrived too late, we are already beyond postmodernism, it's dead, dead and gone, don't you know, it's been buried, where have you been, and that's precisely the problem for literature today, now that postmodernism is dead, writers don't know how to replace it. (245)

He also suggests the name for what follows postmodernism,

. . . post-postmodernism seems a bit too clumsy, and popomo not serious enough, . . . How about The New Novelty . . . or maybe The Postnovelty, or better yet The New Post-future, somebody suggested Avant-Pop, I find that too familiar, you see the difficulty, if we must name that beast looming in front of us [...] we better hurry, otherwise it'll be too late and we'll already have reached the next new post-condition. . . (246)

Thomas Pynchon in his novel *Against the Day* (2006) mentions the declining trends of postmodernism. "Postmodernism was always a temporary arrangement. It knew from the very outset that it would one day be over" (1077). For Pynchon the

events of September eleven point to the end of postmodernism because these events changed our perception of the world and us.

The views of the critics mentioned above state that the contemporary scholars and critics have noticed a shift in literary trends of postmodernism which they suggest refer to the composition of a new cultural and literary theory Post-postmodernism. They assert that the postmodern way of thinking about life and existence does not adequately account for the problems and the challenges of existence the 1990's and in the beginning of the new millennium. It will be easier to understand Post-postmodernism and its ideas if we look at some of the basic modes and ways in which a Post -postmodern writing differs from the postmodern writing.

Hoffman considers that in postmodern literature the work draws attention to itself and attains over complex and more artificial a form that seems conscious of its being. And the same he states as one of the causes that led to the development away from postmodern writing and a "decline in postmodern aesthetics" (624). Referring to the reasons of the decline of postmodern aesthetics he states that innovation deteriorated and instead of creating meaning writings deny meaning or the existence of absolute truth. "... the excessive complex simplicity of the text began to overstrain the capacity and the patience of the recipient with an over coded, unfocused, self-serving experimentality" (624) which led readers to resistance and weariness. The over complex and contrived form of expression is what he believes strains the reader.

Discussing the impulses behind the change in postmodern aesthetics Hoffmann affirms the continuation of some of the experimental modes of postmodernism in the contemporary era. He states that expression in art and literature saw a new appreciation of social and cultural experience after 1990's. The new requirements of writing and its reception could not withstand the modes of expression

devised for novel writing. The radically different postmodern aesthetic experiments maintained a certain influence because, although they had very limited social functions, their basis—the epistemological, anthropological and ontological uncertainties of the time—persisted and left ineffaceable traces on the modes of realism (625).

The time since the nineties is regarded as a transitional era with many uncertainties as well as simultaneous developments, which make it difficult to name or categorize its attributes. Seeking to explore its reasons Hoffman states the prevailing conditions in the media, entertainment industry and politics simplified and at the same time complicated the situation of the arts and literature. It is simplified by the increasing hegemony of culture which tends to influence and support and also integrates and absorbs what was written in fiction. It has made it complicated because under the hegemony of culture it became more difficult for literature to survive. Which he considers was a serious and sure pursuit for modernism and postmodernism—a precondition for serious art, namely its autonomy and its ability to surprise, its devotion to provoke and to break with the old. “Since in contrast to modernism and postmodernism, post-postmodern orientation of the arts mostly happened as a co-evolution with culture with its multicultural trends and its market, social and cultural issues played a greater role than they did before” (Hoffman 226).

James Wood’s ideas also affirm Hoffman’s observations and studies about the contemporary novel and its preoccupation with multicultural representations and focus on realist modes. James Wood states that the “serious literary novel is at an interesting moment of transition” (Wood, “What Can’t Mitchell Do?”). As postmodernism followed modernism, after postmodernism comes post-postmodernism. We might settle for “late postmodernism,” a term that suggests the peculiar statelessness of



contemporary fiction, which finds itself dwindling between tradition and novelty, realism and anti-realism, the mass audience and the elitist critic. It is hard to decide whether this statelessness is “difficult freedom or easy imprisonment”, but the more ambitious contemporary fiction will use a variety of elements and historical techniques.

### **2.2.1 Post-postmodern Novel: Key Features**

After observing the views of some critics who define the cotemporary epoch on the basis of its divergences from the aesthetics of postmodernism it is necessary to observe what are the salient characteristics of the post-postmodern writings. Nicoline Timmer details the characteristics of post-postmodern novel in order to distinguish its main features from that of the postmodern novel.

- Postpostmodern narrative techniques fail to give a meaningful sense of self.
- Characters and narrators show symptoms of a ‘narrative breakdown’ (359).
- The novelist considers search for new narrative practices imperative for the explanation of self and its experiences.
- Post-postmodern narrative sees sharing as a way of “restoring faith in coherence” (355) and order. It also helps in giving legitimacy to thoughts.
- The characters in the post-postmodern novel desire for “containment, borders, limits [and] rules” (356).
- The post-postmodern novel reveals the characters’ willingness to belief which is a sign of taking a leap of faith.

According to Timmer postmodern techniques are still used in post-postmodern novel, but they have a different function in post-postmodern novel; they are simply used to function as ‘realistic’ devices for the authors writing in post-

postmodern age. Postmodern techniques, such as metafictional devices are targeted as hindering the narrator to get to the real and more sentimental parts she/he wants to get across. A desire for connectivity and sociality leads to the return to the human in the contemporary culture at large today. In the post-postmodern novel new 'shared frameworks of reality are under construction' but this does not entail a regression towards already discredited metanarratives or ideologies (358-60).

The criticism that can be distilled from the postmodern novel, according to Timmer is the view that the postmodern condition or postmodern way of thinking and experiencing is "what makes it tough to be a human being". The post-postmodern novel signals "a return to the human" with its focus on what it means to be human today, on empathy and human interaction, on existentialist human concerns (361).

Defining the concerns of the post-postmodern novel Hoffman says that "disappearance of certainty", surfacing of "the uncertain and in-explainable", and the "gap and the mystery of the void are wide-spread phenomena in the post-postmodern novel" (631). This idea of mystery and uncertainty grows out of the "grotesque, the deformation of humans by humans" (632) which give the situation and its description a critical aspect. Hoffman mentions Jean Francois Lyotard's definition of "the postmodern condition" and "that which searches for new presentations... in order to impart a stronger sense of the un-presentable, of the radical perspectives of negation as a postmodern concern." (631). He claims to observe the obvious signs that indicate that the post-postmodern novel of the nineties is still under the influence of the postmodern experiments. It "also participates in games with the gap, the void and the mysterious, even if it chooses a realist method. For instance, McCarthy's novels radicalize and universalize the mystery of cruelty and violence in transhuman sphere" (Hoffmann 635).

Talking about the emergence of postmodernism from modernism as a reaction against certain practices, David Lodge states that the postmodernism's preference of disorder and breakdown will paradoxically lead to search for some new order.

. . . if postmodernism really succeeded in expelling the idea of order (whether expressed in metonymic or metaphoric form) from modern writing, then it would truly abolish itself, by destroying the norms against which we perceive its deviations. A foreground without a background inevitably becomes the background for something else.  
(Lodge 245)

From the discussion stated above the key features of postmodern fiction can be distilled. Postmodern writings consistently tie together genres, styles and attitudes. They savor the blurring of forms (fiction-non-fiction), stances and attitudes (straight-ironic), moods (serious-comic), cultural planes (high-low). These contradictory perceptions of postmodernism bring into the postmodern literature the issues of plurality, fragmentation, and historical discontinuity. It also gives emphasis to destabilized and two-faced meanings, self-reflexivity, discontinuous discourses, and inclusion of previously excluded or ignored discourses.

Below is given a survey of some of the major areas in fiction which have been observed to have undergone a change from postmodern traditions, including themes and narrative techniques and the representation of the characters.

In his book *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991) Thomas Hill Schaub describes that the contemporary fiction represents the writers tackling with an alarming range of human and technological calamities. He sees it as an epoch that staged a retreat from the bankrupt and illusive idealism of progressivism. The novels of this age "retreated into a form of secular existentialism, where the rejection of

ideology, an intense suspicion of rationality, and an investment in the cult of the alienated "self" resulted in a new "centrism" (214).

Hoffmann acknowledges that postmodernism "is a product of the Sixties" (13) and that it confirms "the liberating and deconstructive drives" of the culture of that time "by an exuberant creation of new work, a playful and ironic attitude, and a decomposition of its own traditional logic of cohesion and integration" (33). Hoffmann points out the salient features of postmodern fiction in order to reason out what innovations do the post-postmodern writers make in their works. He uses a narratological approach that separates the "narrated situation" (19) as the basic structural unit of fiction and divides it into four fundamental elements: space and time (the situation's natural frame), character and action (the situation's social frame). What he considers the most distinguishing feature of postmodern fiction is its tendency to deconstruct the totalizing features of narrative: character, plot, theme, etc., in order to defamiliarize the conventions that are already in use by the novelists, to construct and present the basic narrated situation. Hence, postmodern writers place emphasis on the degree to which time, space, action and character are considered to be cultural constructs which are subject to multiple versions of interpretation. Characters are no longer defined in terms of their fundamental identity; rather, they merge into "a multiplicity of roles in the mobile interrelation with other people and the environment, with power-systems, institutions, religious and cultural traditions, and language-patterns" (Hoffman 423).

Hoffmann refers to the works of the renowned writers the 1980s and 1990's, such as Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Richard Powers, and Jonathan Franzen to reason that post-postmodern novelists register their sense that "postmodern fiction is exhausted through a partial return to realist techniques (623). Citing the example of

“neorealist text”, Franzen’s *The Corrections*, he states that it incorporates the postmodern realization that “change, mobility, and becoming have to be accepted as the defining constituents of our world and also of the identity of the individual” (629).

Stephen J. Burn in his work *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008) identifies the beginnings of post-postmodernism and observes the use of post-postmodernist techniques, especially a “deceptively traditional opening” (58), in Franzen’s novel *The Corrections* (2001) and also in some other novels of the 1980’s, for instance Richard Powers’s *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985), David Foster Wallace’s *The Broom of the System* (1987), and William Vollmann’s *You Bright and Risen Angels* (1987).

The title of Stephen J. Burn’s study of Jonathan Franzen’s fiction, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008), implies that there is an end of postmodernism. It also implies that this book presents a study of Franzen’s most recent writings in the phase of the end of postmodernism “the ecological dimension to Franzen’s intertextual dialogue is indicative of post-postmodernism’s attempt to use allusion to direct attention toward the real world outside the book” (67). An interesting and noteworthy point that Burn raises is that he interprets the novelist’s return to closure and the use of realistic techniques as a major divergence from postmodernist techniques and also as a signs of post-postmodernism.

Tom Wolfe in his essays specifies how literature reacted to the environment of the experimentation in the era where postmodernist techniques were considered to have become less apt in presenting contemporary reality. He states that the daily news and events were more horrifying and absurd than anything that fiction is considered capable of presenting. This provided the grounds to writers to experiment with fantasy and self-consciousness in their writings. Wolf suggests for the contemporary novelists

a return to realism. He claimed that postmodernist novelists neglected the task of representing the complexities and dilemmas contemporary man caught in urban setting. Wolfe's novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1988) shows his attempt to reinstate the balance by applying the journalistic methods of Thackeray and Balzac for his representation of the life in urban New York jungle (Wolfe).

Another critic whose observations support Wolf's claims is McClure, whose study of the novel's of Pynchon and Morrison tackles a particular problem in postmodern studies: the notion that a good deal of contemporary fiction can be distinguished by its partial retrieval of forms of spirituality and faith which is considered nonessential and is discarded or repressed in today's material world and secular modernity. McClure's observations hint at the novelist's return to present the theme of human need for spirituality and reclamation of faith and belief in religion which gives sustenance to the parching humanity (McClure 89).

The study of the views of these critics reveals that there is a feeling of exhaustion with the modes and trends of postmodernism. These critics have found in post-postmodern writings a return to realist methods of narration and representation which were either abandoned or given less significance by the postmodern writers. As far as the character and his beliefs are concerned (which also represent the theme of the works) the review of literature reveals that there is a growing need felt by the characters for the reclamation of faith and order, that they seek in order to save themselves from the existential plight prevailing in their lives.

### **2.2.2. Characters in the Postmodern and Post-postmodern Novel**

The postmodern trends in novels reflect the tendencies of the general makeup of the society and as the study of culture, history and art; study of literature also traces the effects and reasons of the changes that are reflected in a person/character's belief

and conduct. Just as the shift from modernism to postmodernism is seen as a continuation of and at the same time a contradiction of certain tenets of life, post-postmodernism too is a shift towards new beginnings for which some old values and notions serve as a foundation as well as certain streams and trends sprout out as a reaction against a set or prescribed notion.

Let us first look at how postmodern and post-postmodern novels depict and perceive character. Observing both the perspectives side by side will highlight their differences as well as the similarities which will help in studying critically the works under study with reference to their presentation of character and their views on meta-narratives, chaos, and their observance or violation of limits and boundaries in the world around them. Since the review of literature reveals that the research on post-postmodern characters and their world-view is scant, keeping the postmodernist notions (on meta-narratives, chaos and containment) as a yardstick will aid in forming a view about post-postmodernist standpoint on the same.

Some of the dominant features of the postmodernist fiction include temporal disorder, corrosion of the sense of time, the loose connection of ideas: paranoia; and vicious circles (Sim 97). These traits are encountered by the readers as well as the characters in the novels whose lives are sketched in perplexing landscapes of postmodern fiction. In, *American Novel and the Way We Live Now* (1983) John W. Aldridge while commenting on the characters in the postmodern novel puts it in this way:

...everyone exists in such a radical state of distortion and aberration that there is no way of determining from which condition in the real world they have been derived or from what standard of sanity they may be said to depart...Characters inhabit a dimension of structureless

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being in which their behavior becomes inexplicably arbitrary and unjudgable ... (113)

According to Fokkema character is often seen as a redundant term in postmodernism, as postmodern fiction appears to subvert and challenge the narrative conventions in practice. Instead of characters, critics have argued, we have only discontinuous 'voices' or subjects caught in 'language' (184). The general idea is that postmodern novels chip away at representation and have more or less flat characters. Fokkema argues that postmodern characters are not just artificial constructs in language that are disengaged from human experience. Postmodern character is caught up in power relations that are formed by history, its own suspicious beliefs, other narratives or language that is why its autonomy is sparse or lost. The novel is a witness to deteriorating situation of human condition resulting in insanity or in the growing power of a public identity (Fokkema 184).

The modernists, according to Sethaug were concerned with epistemology, and were engaged in finding out how we learn to know an essentially stable, consistently ordered reality. In postmodern culture this idea has collapsed. Postmodern\* novelists no longer assume the existence of a singular, stable world; rather they engage in imaginative and fictional acts of destruction and creation of world that they see around them. He contends that "In denying spiritual and psychological completeness and transhistorical permanent meaning postmodern authors...often make assumptions about culture in general, for personal identity is caught up in the relationship between self and culture, self and history, self and language" (5).

Niall Lucy comments that characterization in the novels of the postmodern writers "advances an attack on the notion of identity or on essential selfhood which is not traduced by a temporal dimension which threatens that self with heterogeneity...it



leads to the elaboration of characters whose existence is characterized by difference rather than identity" (140). Chalking out the difference between the characters in the modern novels and the postmodern novel she further states that "postmodern figures are always differing, not just from other characters, but also from their conventional selves" (140). Whereas previously characters were considered as entities "present to themselves", or we can say that they are ultimately reduced to the status of an essential selfhood and thus reified as exchangeable commodities. Postmodern characters dramatize their own "absence" from themselves and characteristically fall into incoherence. "...a seemingly animate character mutates into inanimate object" (140).

These are some of general traits that the characters in the contemporary novel exhibit. Since the study takes into account the character's views regarding meta-narratives, boundaries and chaos it is necessary that we look at what world views the characters hold regarding these basic notions of postmodernism.

Postmodern characters in rejecting grand narratives, favor "mini-narratives," stories that explain practices at small scale, local events, rather than large-scale universal views or global concepts. The mini-narratives that postmodern characters pledge to, are always temporary, conditional, provisional, and make no assertion of permanence, universality, reason or truth. For Lyotard such meta-narratives are the stories people devise and thus use them as ground for ethical and ideological judgments (234). An era that does not accommodate the meta-narratives of legitimating as such is deprived of the capacity to make universal statements about the nature of reality and thus to ground its values in knowledge about its real 'essences'. This situation raises, especially for the critics of Lyotard, the idea of relativism: to abandon universals could lead to 'universal abandon' (Hall 639).

In A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) the metanarrative of history is seen clearly intact. The past appears as an integral part of the present, and an otherworldly force seems to drive the characters toward the discovery of the past. Leader's study of Byatt's novel shows that "Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are unfashionable in the postmodern novel" (Leader, "Postmodern or Post-postmodern").

Byatt shows Roland realizing that "[h]e was in a Romance" (460) —a double entendre on *romance*, referring to the novel's title—*Possession: A Romance*. The novel contains a quotation from Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), which states that the mode of Romance permits the author to "attempt to connect with a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us" (xi). Byatt restores a literary form of the past, and integrates "new mechanistic analysis" with "new optimism" (Leader) not about individuals, but about the necessity of metanarratives of history and subjectivity.

Byatt's stance against Lyotard's refutation of metanarratives, points to an ambiguity in Lyotard's argument, also pointed out by Jameson in his introduction to Lyotard's text that we tend to doubt metanarrative structures specifically during scientific periods of history, such as capitalism. The so-called revolution of our present-day storytelling modes then is nothing more than a predictable phenomenon, and also not a departure from previous narrative form. This aspect of postmodernism "becomes itself a symptom of the state it seeks to diagnose" (Jameson xi). In light of this, *Possession* represents not a throwback to earlier old-fashioned narrative form, but a progression along a line of narrative theory that like all other philosophies across time shift, and evolve and incorporate the old with the new. Jameson asserts what Lyotard is unwilling to, which is that master- narratives do not dissolve but go

underground, and continue to impress our thoughts and actions (xii). Possession is evidently an example of this (Leader).

### 2.3. *The Road and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

This section details the remarks and views of the critics on the two novels that the study takes for the analysis of the characters. The review of the literature available on these works will help in understanding the style and themes as well as the perspectives of the characters in these novels.

Greenwood endorses that in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) the morality and the narrative coexist comfortably side by side. He further adds that critics have emphasized the social, historical, and moral dimensions of his novels, and more significantly the ethical plights and decisions of his characters which reflect more vividly the very ideology and beliefs that these characters choose to lead them on in their life (123).

Works in which McCarthy's characters maintain a connection to family, and their society, include; *The Stonemason*, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. In these novels, society is collapsing around male protagonists who struggle to survive as the embodiments and agents of good against overpowering situations. In his novels the meta-narrative of family, which is a source of pride, is still revered and followed by the characters and the boundaries of good and evil, which seem to be considered blurring in a postmodern existence, powerfully visible and enact. Critic Dana Phillips asserts that the book's "moral or political world-view is bound to be disturbing to readers who...expect novels to offer an imaginary solution to individual or social ills". She goes on to argue that McCarthy "is not a writer of the modern or postmodern era but of Holocene" (425).

Holloway argues that McCarthy's full significance can only be understood if his work is contextualized within the larger framework of political, economic, and intellectual discourses of the time in which his novels have been produced. Drawing on the ideas of Marxist thinkers such as Fredric Jameson, George Lukacs, and Jean-Paul Sartre, he shows how McCarthy's "late modernism" resists many of the postmodern assumptions about literary narrative that have come to shape our understanding of aesthetics in recent times (78).

The review of the literature available on the *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reveals that Junot Diaz has relied heavily on modernist techniques of fiction i.e., realism and patchwork narrative, with the inclusion of a number of narrative voices (a post-modern mode of narration) A.O Scott in his article "Dreaming in Spanglish" talks about the patch work of styles and techniques employed by Diaz. Diaz's novel also has a wild, capacious spirit" (Scot) making it feel much larger than it is. Within its relatively compact span the novel contains boisterous styles and a multitude of genres. The tale of Oscar is a young-adult melodrama draped over a multigenerational immigrant family chronicle that delves into "tropical magic realism, punk-rock feminism, hip-hop machismo, post-postmodern pyrotechnics and enough polymorphous multiculturalism to fill up an Introduction to Cultural Studies syllabus" (Scot).

Michiko Kakutani compares Diaz's style with that of the other postmodern writers such as David Forster Wallace and considers his novel "a harrowing meditation on public and private history and the burdens of familial history" (Kakutani). Critics have also commented on the cultural and stylistic intermingling prevalent in Diaz's novel, and the fact that Diaz's narrator smoothly switches from romantic prose to frivolous slang, from English to Spanish. "This kind of gleeful

cross-stitching is a hallmark of hip-hop-generation fiction" (Mansbach). Commenting on the theme and style of Diaz's work he writes that Diaz craftily balanced an intimate, multigenerational story and family tragedy with a meditation on the grave terrors that have gripped their homeland. Both past and the present remain in focus and are equally immediate. Diaz's prose swings artfully between realities, histories and fiction, keeping the reader spellbound (Mansbach).

The review of the literature and criticism available on Diaz's novel reveals that critics have found multiple features in his work, both in its form and subject matter, which signal that it contains many characteristics that make it a post-postmodern novel. For example that it is a story that is multigenerational, as altermodern works shows that artists wander in geography as well as in history. It voices multiple narrators' point of view and makes use of multiple languages and styles.

Examining and questioning the claims and assumptions of the critics will lead to a critical inquiry of the questions that the research seeks to answer. The survey of research on *The Road* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reveals that there is a need to carry out research to investigate the major characters in these novels in order to know their world view. The protagonist is the locus of the action, whose life throws light on various ideas (the themes of the novel) and to represent whom (in a particular style and form) the whole narrative is structured. A close scrutiny of the ideas the protagonist holds will give a better and clear insight into his beliefs and world view, which will help us to determine the ideas that the contemporary novel through its protagonists presents to us. In order to see whether the characters hold postmodern world view regarding the meta-narratives, breakdown of boundaries, pessimism and sense of loss, celebration of chaos and

nostalgia or they have adopted post-postmodern view and reject to believe postmodernism as an overarching philosophy in their lives. The study's methodological frame work that is drawn from the postmodernist literary theory will help a great deal in knowing about the nature of human perspective by connecting what is found in the texts with the social reality.

postmodernist theory that the study attempts to verify in the context of the novels of the new millennium with reference to characters is the breakdown of boundaries. Postmodernism claims that there is blurring of distinctions that accommodates diversity, accepts heterogeneity and pluralism. This idea is verified by observing whether the characters exist in a world in which boundaries and divisions have been eroded or if they are still observed and kept intact. Proliferation of nostalgia is another postmodern assertion that forms the basis for analysis of the characters stance on remembrance of the past as enriching and comforting. The analysis of the characters' views and actions is carried out by keeping these basic tenets of postmodernism as the bases of the theoretical framework of the study.

### **3.1. Characters' Adherence to Metanarratives**

The societies and civilizations build themselves on system of beliefs, whether religious, cultural or political. These beliefs are passed from one generation to another in the form of scriptures. These kinds of beliefs in the course of time have become metanarratives. In Lyotard's view the day of such all embracing totalizing systems of beliefs has passed (60) and in today's worlds man has to derive meaning from little narratives or micro-narratives or from local justifications. Postmodernism proclaims the collapse of these metanarratives. It asserts that the postmodern man has nothing to hold and he is living in the postmodern world in a helpless condition. The so called universal foundations such a morals, justice, truth, etc., have collapsed. Man is unwilling to believe them. He is having a decentered consciousness, the ideals and theories which he believed so far have failed to offer him any solution. Postmodernism laments that there is no foundation to form all these, there are no rules, morals and laws suitable for all periods and for all people. Therefore it has led to "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv).

Keeping in view the prevailing notion about metanarratives in postmodernism I examine the characters in the novel under study to understand what are the characters' views about the metanarratives of religion, social conduct, notion of good and bad, love, patriarchy, and storytelling.

### **3.1.1. Religion**

Religious faith and the need for security of God figure prominently in the man's thoughts and actions. The protagonist of the novel—the unnamed father is an inherently good man with a strong belief in God. When the man studies the place he finds the world around him as “Barren, silent, godless” (McCarthy 4) suggesting that from the outset the protagonist is in search of something that he misses in his life, or something that has been forgotten or abandoned. The man seeks light and also looks for signs of fire or smoke as light and fire are the major religious symbols which represent knowledge and humanity. “... [He] looked toward the east for any light but there was none..” (3). The novel opens with the description of a desolate landscape, where cold and darkness rule. The man and boy search for warmth of fire for sustenance and light to find their way in the dark. “...they went to the top of the hill...watching for any sign of a fire or a lamp” (8). In the extreme cold weather the only solace that the man and the boy get is from lighting the fire, and the man does so with almost a religious fervor. Once when the man doses in the “wonderful warmth” (26) of the fire he sees his son stroking the flames that he calls “God's own firedrake” (39). The man's thoughts about the fire reflect his belief in the authenticity of religious belief.

Fire is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. In the Bible the Holy Spirit is associated with fire. Fire burns out the dross and gives light and warmth. John the Baptist said in Matthew 3:11: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is



coming after me is mightier than I ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Fire is a cleansing element. Water cleanses externally, but fire purifies internally, penetrating to the very substance of things. The Holy Spirit penetrates to the roots of human conduct. He requires human motives, aims, will and "thoughts and intents of the heart" to be free of all impurities ("Fire"). Like the flame that consumes the dross and leaves the molten metal pure, the Holy Spirit detaches man from sins and sinful, self-centered life and burns into man's being the pure and holy nature and life of Christ.

The most significant tropes that McCarthy employs in the novel for his protagonist to follow are fire and journey. These are two of the most significant and repeatedly used religious symbols, referring to Christian quest for redemption and salvation. The man is either in search of fire or keeps lighting fire in order to assure his and his son's survival. Also he is constantly on the move. Despite the fact that his health is deteriorating and he is not sure whether he would find a better place on earth where the prevailing chaos and anarchy would not exist, he keeps traveling as if stopping at one place would turn him into stone. This journey on foot towards the south is taken by the man as a quest for life through the ashen landscape of a post-apocalyptic world. If he cannot save his own life, he will be happy to lead his son through across the borders of insanity and suffering.

When the man feels scared and is on the verge of losing his ability to strive, he offers to his son the justification for their journey through the desolate land. He considers himself an apostle on a pilgrimage. To him his journey on the road, in the wilderness where they have to avoid the bands of cannibals who roam the roads, is a holy journey. They have to keep the fire burning which is in fact the light or spirit—

the human goodness. The son also seeks confirmation from his father regarding their sacred mission:

We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa?

Yes. We are.

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That's right.

Because we're carrying the fire.

Yes. Because we're carrying the fire. (70)

A symbol of the goodness in human perseverance and hope is the "fire" that the father assures his son they carry. As good guys, the man and the boy carry the fire internally, which means that they strive under all circumstances to do their best to keep themselves from descending into cannibalism. From the onset of the journey the father is in search of some light "but there was none" (3). In his dream he wandered in a cave led by his son who is holding his hand "like pilgrims in a fable" (3). And he sees their light reflected on the walls of the cave. The man's dream is very significant as it reveals his state of mind and the purpose of his life now. All around him is utter darkness and it is the light within him and his son that shows them the way in the darkness. In his dream the man sees himself and his son as 'pilgrims'. The father's vision of himself as a pilgrim shows his belief in the metanarrative of religion. It reveals what significance he attaches to his own and his son's life that is not to be wasted or given away easily. Holding the son's hand and finding his way in the dark shows what significance his child holds for him and it also strengthens the idea that the son is seen as the *Son* "the child was his warrant. If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (4). The father's quest south to ensure his son's survival is carried out with religious fervor.

When his wife chose to commit suicide, to prevent herself from harm from other human beings who have nothing to offer but cruelty and danger, the man did not follow her. There were two bullets in the gun and they both could have ended up their lives together but the man decided to live. And his decision to choose life over death was prompted by his sense of duty as a father—a saviour, a protector and a guide for his son. “That boy was all that stood between him and death” (25). The father lives up to the promise that he made to himself and his wife, that he will take care of his son at all cost, “shield it from harm with your own body”(49).

In some instances, however, the man expresses doubt about, or at least questions, the existence of a higher power. “Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the palling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? ...Oh God, he whispered, Oh God” (10). It reveals his desperation and helplessness in the face of hardships when he believes his only hope of survival and salvation is God. And when he sees no help coming he even argues with God and shows exasperation. Yet his exasperation shows his belief that God is listening to him. And He is the only one whom he can talk to and even argue with. This belief in God is a metanarrative that his religion and the clergy have taught him.

The man and boy have an encounter with a wandering Melvillian, Ely, whom the man is persuaded into feeding by his son. This encounter is very significant as “Eli” was the Jewish high priest and one of the last judges of Israelite. His sons were behaving wickedly and Eli was aware of their behavior but did not reprimand them. According to the text Eli and his son’s will be punished for their sins with all men dying before reaching old age and being placed in positions subservient than other priests. A curse is placed on all of Eli’s male heirs forever (“Eli”). Ely suggests that he and others are here to preach the central message of the reality of this world that it

is the only world, and Prophets are necessary in order to correct the usual ways of the world. When Ely expresses surprise at meeting a child, the man counters, "What if I said that he's a god?" (145). Indeed, the man treats his son as an individual above all others, with a devoutness that arguably surpasses the usual sentiments of paternal love, affection, and protection. Ely goes further and denies the possibility of God's existence in such a destructive place as earth "There is no God and we are his prophets," (143), whether or not divinity is manifested in the boy. Ely believes that the universe is so indifferent to humans that humans need to learn this basic lesson in order to honestly confront reality. "Where men cant live gods fare no better. You'll see" (145).

The boy's religious faith seems ambiguous. When Ely asks the man whether his son believes in God, he replies, "I don't know what [the boy] believes in" (146). The boy's faith in God is practically irrelevant compared with his trust in humans, as evidenced when the woman whose family rescues him at the novel's conclusion, attempts to teach him about religion. "He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father" (241). The boy carries "the fire" which the father regards as, the fire of hope and human resilience. Ely has stopped believing in God but the man continues to believe in Him.

On one occasion the father offers the loaded flare gun to the boy and asks him to shoot across the bay to which the son says "You shoot it, Papa. You know how to do it" (207) showing his trust in his father and his experience and accepting his own lack of it. When the father shoots, the boy asks "Could they see it very far...If you wanted to show where you were." The father asks who does he want should see it, is it the good guys he wants should see their shooting or God? To this the boy replies "May be somebody like that" (207). This shows that to the father if there is anyone

who he wishes should see and rescue them should only be God, whereas the boy who has never had any retrievable memory of order in the world or of the blessings that his father has enjoyed, the presence or possibility of finding God does not have the same meaning or significance as it has for the father.

The father and son are traveling southwest towards the shore. And the only dam in the city is giving a picture of dark tarred water. The father gives a bath to the son, in an effort to wipe off all the filth and dirt, implying that it will have a purifying effect on the boy. This act of bathing likens traditional baptism that "works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare" ("Baptism"). Children's baptism is considered as an act to please God and it assures the sanctification of infants by God. The father's act of giving a bath to his son demonstrates that he values the religion and believes that the ritual will sanctify his son's spirit. In a world bombarded with chaos and destruction brought by the sins and lawlessness prevalent in the world the father's effort to stick to the norms of the old system of religious beliefs and social norms is an evidence of his belief in the metanarrative of religion and religion as guide which teaches goodness of conduct.

Though the man has become distrustful of and suspicious about the other people on earth, he still retains his faith in God. Whenever the man and the boy are caught in danger and trying situations the man asks his son to pray. Often they pray for lightning. The prayer for lightning suggests the man's effort to keep himself from descending into darkness. While walking through the woods at night the man constantly asks his son to pray for lightning as it would help them tread a safe way between sand and sea. Throughout the journey the man relies on the power of prayer.

Later in the novel when the man and the boy are caught in a dark and stormy night they “went on in perfect blackness, sightless as the blind.”(197). As it becomes difficult for them to find their way the boy asks the father “We’re going the right way” the father says to the son “Pray for lightning” (197) Throughout the novel the man relies on his faith in the power of God which is manifested in his constant praying and also in his teaching his son the same.

The man offers a prayer—thanksgiving—before having the meal when they found food that was staked in a bunker “Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we would not eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re sorry that you didn’t get to eat it and we hope that you are safe in heaven with God”( 123). The father’s prayer parallels the traditional religious thanksgiving celebration in which the Christians thank God for blessings such as victory or end of drought. First Thanksgiving was celebrated to thank Native Americans who helped the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony survive in the winter in New England. It is a tradition in Christian families to start the thanksgiving dinner by saying grace (“Thanksgiving”). The father’s offering prayer before meal is an evidence of his faith in God, his belief in the metanarrative of religion and religious traditions and rituals. The prayer also serves a reassurance to himself and his son that their act of eating somebody else’s food is not wrong and also when he assumes that those people must be safe in heaven it reveals that he is trying to cope with the fear of the unknown, mysterious and dreadful things by taking a leap of faith. The prayer also works to teach the boy the codes and rules of the religion the father follows and which seem to have been abandoned or have vanished from the world. The father’s saying that they would not have usurped the rights of those people had they been alive also states his adherence to the metanarrative of goodness. The man

does not stop long in the bunker where he has a number of comforts. He moves on. This is like not being lost in the bounties of the earth and moving on to the real comfort of heaven despite the problems in the way.

There are also overtones to the effect that the son is in fact *the Son*. This may just be a matter of the father needing to believe in something in order to sustain himself in this horrible world. He also repeatedly reminds his son that they're "carrying the fire" (70) of civilization. Perhaps religious ideas first came to humans who lived in a similarly uncivilized world and imagined God the Father as something like their own earthly fathers. "There is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who is not honored here today" (233) the father says, trying to make his son understand why they inhabit a gray moonscape. "Whatever form you spoke of you were right" (233).

Benjamin Whitmer's comment helps to validate the significance of the father's act of lighting the fire and its association with the religious symbolism.

McCarthy's novels are all variations on similar themes, and *The Road* expands the central trope of its predecessor, *No Country for Old Men*, which hinges on Sheriff Bell's relationship with his estranged father. It is an estrangement that is reconciled, at least in dream, when Bell envisions his father riding past him through the mountains, "carrying fire in a horn ... and in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up." This trope of "carrying the fire" becomes central to *The Road*, as the man and the boy seek to establish their place in the overwhelming bleakness of their existence.

A primary source of tension in the novel is if there are other good guys to be found on the road. The man is not interested in finding out and to believe in the possibility of the existence of good people, whereas the boy desires to renew some sort of social compact with strangers. In an implicit way, the conversation with Ely resolves that tension in the boy's favor. Moreover, Ely provides a more direct answer. When the man asks him how he survives on the road, Ely replies that other people on the road have been providing him food. When the man scoffs at the idea, Ely points out that he himself has done so.

The father protects his son like a shepherd, guarding him against all dangers from the world like a shepherd guards his sheep from wolves. The image of shepherd and sheep evokes the religious significance of the trope. The Good Shepherd is a pericope in which Jesus is depicted as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. The context of the allegorical story of the Good Shepherd shows that the people around Jesus realized that he was asserting that he was God ("Good Shepherd"). The father protects his son like a shepherd protects its sheep from wolves and the son follows him like sheep. The father's responsibility of his son's care and safety shows the father's belief in the metanarrative of religious narrative.

### **3.1.2. Notion of Good and Bad**

There is a constant tension in the novel between the good and the bad. The persistent danger to the father and the son is from the bad guys who murder and even eat men. The father is strongly aware of keeping a distinction between them and the bad guys. When the man and the boy enter a house to find food on opening a locked door the father gets a terrible shock on seeing people locked up in the room. They are naked and some have their limbs removed. These captives appear in a miserable state and the man understands that the bad guys have kept them here and will consume



them as food. He quickly grabs his son so that he does not see the miserable captives who are screaming and begging the man for help. The boy asks the father about the bad guys and the people these guys have kept as slaves. Despite the pleading of the miserable captives the father hurries to save his son.

“Are they going to eat them?”

“They are going to eat them aren’t they?”

Yes

And we couldn’t help them because then they’d eat us too”. (107)

The conversation of the father and the son reveals that the *bad guys* are going to eat the captives and though the boy feels sympathy for the captives and wishes to help and save them he realizes that if they attempt to help them they too might become the victims. The father and the son’s decision of not helping the captives shows that help is conditional to risk. It is the same as in present day society; we do not help when we feel threatened.

Benjamin Whitmer notes that the conversation between the father and the boy shows that the notion of good and bad is not just derived from religious, moral, ethical and social codes but it is circumstantial as well. When the father and his son’s lives are in danger the father shrinks from helping others in need, regardless of the fact that the father shows a number of times that in a world ruled by chaos and cannibalism he would adhere to the old and tested belief in religion and the notion of good and bad as taught to him. At times it is ambiguous and difficult to determine whether the father’s act of not helping the poor man is an act of self defence necessary at that stage or an act of cruelty and violation of the notion of good taught by religion. And the son’s reply comes as a justification of the father’s act “And we couldn’t help them because then they would eat us too” (107).

The father is driven by the sense of keeping a distinction between himself and the bad guys that is why whenever he gets a chance he gives his son a bath and on one occasion also cuts the son's hair. The son also applauds the father's job. Later the father cuts his own hair and trims his beard. When he asks his son how he looks, the son does not reply and turns to look away from the father, implying that he is confused because of his father's attitude and cannot determine his father's kinship either with good guys or bad guys. The son acknowledges that the father has done a good job of protecting him and taking care of him but he feels that the father has become selfish and self centered and shrinks from helping others, thus showing a contradiction in his words and conduct. The act symbolically states that for the man their physical appearance has to be different from that of the bad guys who have descended into savagery and brutality. Long hair, dirty skin and clothes may make him and his son appear similar to the tribe of the bad guys and the father does not want this distinction to get blurred. This confirms the man abides by the metanarratives of goodness, cleanliness and religion.

Rick Wallach asserts that the father and the son struggle to remain hopeful and to sustain their faith as well. Their quest is not just for survival amid chaos but also for sustaining and preserving their faith. He puts it in this way:

They seek the most rudimentary sort of salvation. However, in *The Road*, such redemption as might be permitted by their circumstances depends on the boy's ability to sustain his own instincts for compassion and empathy in opposition to his father's insistence upon their mutual self-interest and survival at all physical and moral costs.

(Wallach)

The boy's mother commits suicide. The mother's suicide is good as well as bad. It is good that she ended her life because the circumstances that the father and the son face appear to be unbearable and tough. She gave up on life as she did not want to be a victim of torture and misery brought to people by their own fellow beings. The mother's suicide can be seen as an act of self defense. On the other hand her giving up on life is bad as it goes against the notion of good and right, where we are taught to face the tests and trials and not to give up hope. The father faces the situation with moral, spiritual and mental resilience. The mother's act of committing suicide appears to be an act of cowardice and also a rejection of the notion of right and wrong that religion teaches.

### 3.1.3. Love

In McCarthy's *The Road* the metanarrative of love is still intact. The father believes that it is his duty to look after and protect his son and he is even ready to kill anyone that tries to harm his son. This is evident when a man puts a knife to his son's throat and he shoots the man. There is no doubting the father's love for his son, but sometimes this love serves as an excuse for the father's paranoid behavior. This is observed when a man steals their cart that is loaded with food, and, though the thief returns the cart, the father, pointing his pistol at him, demands that the man takes off all his clothes. The father tells his son he did not kill him. In other words, the man's thirst for survival is fueled by the love for his son. While the man may expect his own death, he lives in order to seek life for the boy. Unlike his wife who committed suicide, the man does not wish to save his son from civilization's destruction, rape, murder, and cannibalism by killing him preemptively. To the father, suicide is only an option for his son if he is to be imminently harmed. Perhaps for this reason he leaves

the pistol with the boy whenever he explores a new and potentially unsafe location alone.

It is only the man's love for his son that drives him to ensure his son's survival. The man frequently demonstrates the strength of this love, most obviously in his decision to shoot and kill the man who threatens the boy's life. Throughout the journey, the man does not kill out of malice or for food. He only hurts others (the man who attacks the boy and the thief who takes their cart) when they threaten the boy's survival. His weariness and distrust toward others, which are well justified, stem primarily out of his drive to protect his son.

In less violent and threatening situations, the man gives his son as many treats as possible—an old can of Coca Cola, a powdered drink mix, which are the last remnants of mankind. In a store in a ruined supermarket the father found a can of cola, “ [He] sat looking at a Coca Cola.” (19) and offers it to his son saying, “It’s a treat. For you”(19). When the boy asks him to take some the father says “I want you to drink it” (20). It shows the father’s love for his son and also that he realizes that his son is deprived of the treats and pleasures that a child wishes for and expects from his father. As the man lays dying, he tells his son to eat his share of food, instead of keeping it for himself in the hope of regaining his health. These small gifts and sacrifices are strong examples of his filial love.

#### **3.1.4. Patriarchy**

The metanarrative of patriarchy is also clearly seen to be working throughout the novel. The father is the patriarch who makes the decisions and directs the actions of the child. More subtly, McCarthy also explores issues of trust between the father and his son. The boy looks to his father not only for information but also for guidance and reassurance. Though he often seeks reassurance, the boy also realizes that his

father may not always be truthful about their chances of survival. The boy admits that he thinks his father might lie to him about dying, to which the father responds, "Okay. I might. But we're not dying" (86). The man also questions the boy's notion of trust regarding the issue of "good guys." Disillusioned by his father's treatment of others on the road, the son does not believe his father's pronouncements that he and his son are the good guys.

The metanarrative of patriarchy portrays father as god. The father's guidance for the boy mirrors his role as the Father and the effort to save his son at all cost is a hint at the role of the boy as the Son. "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (65). While sleeping, on a cold night the father holds the boy close and feeling his bony structure he muses over the idea whether he is a good father or not, implying that if as a patriarch he cannot keep his son from harm he cannot claim to be a good father. As a provider and protector the father does his best. Whenever he finds food he makes sure that his son gets a wholesome share. He even tests the food before offering it to his son as once when he finds mushrooms growing in the woods he makes sure that they are not poisonous before offering them to his son.

He is burdened with the sense of duty towards his son that is why he teaches life lessons to his son. He teaches him how to use a gun out of his sense of duty as a parent to teach and protect his son and help him learn the ways to live and survive. Once on the shore when the boy draws shapes on the sand the father asks him to write an alphabet and expresses regret that "We don't work on your lessons anymore" (206). His regret over the fact that he is not fulfilling his responsibility as a father to teach and educate his son makes him feel that he is not a good father.

Over the course of the journey, the father struggles to keep himself and his son alive. Increasingly, the son becomes distant, because he rejects his father's creed of

kinship. The son tries to give food away, first to a little boy, then to an embittered old man, and finally to a thief who attempts murder. Angrily, the father *says* you're not the one who has to worry about everything, and the son says, "I am the one" (197).

The child feels that the father is not good to others, it means that he also subscribes to the metanattative of good/bad and social norms, hence metanarratives exist. Toward the end of the novel, the son no longer wants to hear his father's stories because he deems them untrue. In a brief but telling exchange, the boy tells his father, "I always believe you.... Yes I do. I have to" (156). In this respect the son's trust in his father is forged out of necessity. The man is the boy's only companion and authority figure, and he knows about the nature of human life before the unnamed catastrophe. The father's experience makes it impossible to fully discount the father, so the son has reason to trust him in addition to the fact that he must count on his father for protection.

### **3.1.5. Social Conduct**

The father is scared of making any advances towards the strangers that he meets on the road and does not feel the need to renew any form of social compact. He shows on a number of occasions that he respects the social norms and observes them too. When he finds food and other luxuries in a bunker he realizes that he is intruding into somebody else's property and consuming their food. That's why in the prayer that he offers he asks for forgiveness from those people who have staked that food but could not live to consume it. The man pledges to observe human rights even in the face of extreme hunger and need and does not wish to usurp other's rights.

When the father and his son's lives are in danger the father shrinks from helping others. Whether the father's act of not helping the poor man is an act of self defence or violation of the notion of good is hard to determine. The son's reply comes

as a justification of the father's act "And we couldn't help them because then they would eat us too." (107) This reveals that the notion of social conduct is circumstantial as well.

The father and son are carrying the responsibility of the transmission of some small part of meaning from generation to generation in a world bombarded with chaos. They move through a post-apocalyptic landscape that is hostile and brutal, but they keep each other alive; and above all they hang onto the dignity necessary to make remaining alive worthwhile. They do not kill, they don't steal from the living, they help where it is possible to do so and most importantly, as the novel symbolically signifies, they do not eat other people.

### **3.1.6. Storytelling and Naming**

Storytelling and naming are means of reenacting and remembering those objects or concepts which have been destroyed and lost. The father feels it necessary to transfer to his son the lessons and skills that he had learned, as if forgetting will render them lost forever. The father teaches his son to "Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember" (27). The father wishes to soothe the boy by storytelling after a terrible encounter with a man who threatened their life and in which the father got badly injured. But the boy refuses to listen to stories saying "Those stories are not true...in the stories we are always helping people and we don't help people" (225). Equally important is the father's reply, "They don't have to be true. They're stories" (225). The father relies on storytelling in order to distract the boy from the present or reality that is too harsh to bear and does not offer any escape. Storytelling for the man is a means of bringing back the past that shows his nostalgia for the bygone times. The boy refuses to believe in the metanarrative of goodness as well as the authenticity of the past as he says that the stories that his father tells him are not true. The father's

reply is worth considering. He states that stories which present the metanarrative of goodness, morality, triumph of good are not to be considered true as they are just 'stories' meant only for the sake of assuring us about our goodness which exists only in stories and narrative and not in reality.

### **3.2. Breakdown of Boundaries in the Characters' World**

The distinctions between high and low, good and bad, and right and wrong are believed to have diminished in the present era. Plurality, heterogeneity and mixing are considered to be the dominant order of the day. Postmodernism rejects boundaries of all kind preferring subjectivism and personal whims. The father in *The Road* consistently comes across the question of existence of distinctions and boundaries. On various levels and issues that the characters come across, there is a need to obsessive the existence of distinctions and boundaries.

#### **3.2.1. Good and bad**

This section deals with the notion of good and bad or evil as a boundary or distinction in order to see whether a distance is maintained between good and bad in society or whether the distinction between the two has blurred. The previous section dealt with the notion of good and bad as a metanarrative whereas this section looks at the same notion as a boundary.

In an ordered world the distinctions are maintained between classes and types of people. The good guys and bad guys move in distinct worlds like the elite dwell in posh areas and the poor live in slums, e.g., Beverly Hills and the projects or ghettos. This is no longer possible on the road. Both good and bad people are on the road. They intersect, even chase each other. The father wants to retain this distinction.

The man calls himself and his son *good guys* and warns his son against the danger inherent in the world in the form of *bad guys*. This distinction that is kept



intact by the man between himself and the people who scavenge the earth shows that the notion of right and wrong is kept separate and the mixing of evil and good is disliked. And the father is quite aware to instill this notion of right and wrong, good and bad, old and new to his son as well. The boy begins to question the notion of goodness, witnessing around him the plight of people and also how his father struggles to save them from the danger inherent in men. The boy often asks his father "Are we still the good guys?" to which the father replies "Yes we are still the good guys. And we always will be. Yes. We always will be" (65). The boy's question to the father reveals his fear regarding their encountering the 'bad guys'. When the father sees smoke at a distance and wishes to go there in search of food, the boy voices the fear "What if it's the bad guys?"(67).

The conversation of the father and son on their encounter with the group of people, who passed them with their wagons being drawn by 'illclothed' slaves in "dogcollars and yoked each to each" (78), reveals the father's deliberate efforts to keep the distinction or the boundary intact between themselves and the bad guys, whom he wants to avoid and guard himself and the child against.

In such a world, however, the conflict between the good guys and the bad guys is not at all clear. To the father, they are the "good guys," even though the father commits a murder for the sake of his son. The man does not consider it evil when he acts violently in defense of his son. Other instances of selfish behaviour include not helping those captives who were being eaten. The man considers this choice more praiseworthy than the choices of the people who kill and even cannibalize others in order to survive. More than once, the boy seeks confirmation from his father that they are the "good guys" and that the "bad guys" are those who seek to hurt them--thieves, murderers, and cannibals.

The boy's queries also highlight the underlying difference in morality between the man and the boy. To the man, his killing is justified because it was committed as an act of saving his son, a responsibility that he says was assigned to him by God. The boy, however, is concerned about the nature of the act, regardless of the circumstances. He wonders whether, having murdered someone, they can still be considered the good guys. But the father unequivocally still considers them good, or at least wants to reassure his son that he feels that way, protecting his son at all costs.

The boy does not understand the need to hurt others in any circumstance, even when they may pose a danger to his life or have already hurt him. More than once, the boy seeks confirmation from his father that they are the "good guys" and that the "bad guys" are those who seek to hurt them--thieves, murderers, and cannibals. The boy pleads with his father to spare the thief and to help him. Because he is complicit in the father's punishment of the thief (stripping him of his clothes and shoes), the boy no longer feels like one of the "good guys." He feels that the stories his father tells of their heroic survival are not truthful. And also the boy cannot agree with his father that the right thing to do is to refuse to help others who are in dire need, especially when they have not shown any evidence of being dangerous. One perceives that in such a difficult world, the distinction between good and evil is rather nuanced. People's actions taken at face value are far from enough to determine whether someone is a good or bad. The man's version of the notion of good and bad, right and wrong is revised and tailored to make his survival possible in the chaotic world.

### **3.2.2. Man and Boy**

The boy and the man are unnamed, which also shows the distinctions and boundaries are preserved. Naming would imply breakdown of boundaries. There is a distinction of rank preserved between father and son by labeling them as *man* and

*boy*, which refers to the fact that the 'man' holds experience, authority and more control whereas the 'boy' connotes that he is young, immature and inexperienced. The notions of manhood and boyhood are kept distinct as it is evident from the actions of the father who chooses and decides everything for his son. The son is expected to submit, follow and learn.

### 3.2.3. Survival and Savagery

The most difficult issue that the man faces is to ensure his and his son's survival and not to lose humanity. It is so tough in this godforsaken land where death lurks after them at every step they take. The paradox is that in order to survive the father has to be cruel and adopt a certain degree of brutality that is demonstrated by the bad guys who have turned into savages, and are eating their own species to survive. The man makes sure that he does not kill in order to harm others or to enslave or consume humans, though he does not give a second thought when his son's life is in danger and shoots the man who intends to kill the boy. The man considers himself a *good guy* as long as he is not eating humans. The boy expresses his fear of being evil like cannibals, and asks for confirmation from his father.

"We wouldn't ever eat anybody, would we?"

No of course not.

Even if we were starving?

...No matter what

...Because we are the good guys.

Yes.

And we are carrying the fire.

And we are carrying the fire. Yes."(109)

On the other hand the bad guys are killing, enslaving and eating their fellow men. Cannibals are doing it to survive. The practice of looting, plundering, scavenging places, enslaving and killing people in order to survive has become acceptable to the people in order to sustain themselves. The man tries to maintain a distance from these savages who kill and eat people and believes that his murdering others is justified as long as he does so in self defense and does not eat them.

#### **3.2.4. Life and Death**

The distinction between life and death is also blurred. The characters appear to be walking dead to whom life is living death. In a conversation with his wife that the man recalls the wife says to him “We’re the walking dead in a horror film” (47). The man struggles to keep himself and his son alive in a place that presents the picture of dooms day. The sights and scenes of burned, charred, dark and cold earth that they witness present the picture of hell. Above all the picture of people held in the bunker shows the man a scene from hell. The man fights to escape the horrors of death and is “starved, exhausted, sick with fear” (99). When the man finds coffee, ham, biscuits and other rarities he treats his son with these items as they are the signs of life that was once known to them. More sophisticated aspects of human civilization have been obliterated, and the names of such things are slowly being forgotten by the remaining humans, following the things themselves into oblivion. Such things include colors, types of birds, and certain foods. More importantly, fundamental truths and customs regarding human life have been lost. These include the capacity to endure and hope; to feel empathy, love, and altruism. The ruined earth and chaotic existence make the father experience death in life.

### 3.3. Nostalgia and Optimism

The man's dreams and memories, of his life before the destruction of civilization, help a good deal in getting to know the man's attitudes and beliefs. Though the man rejects his dreams as death's lure away from the sobering reality of his impending end, these dreams in some way validate the existence of his previous life, the existences of "...things no longer known in the world.... He thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins.... What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not" (111). This passage also demonstrates the significance of memory for a person; the mind remembers and thus validates phenomena which may no longer exist. Failing to remember and to name these phenomena render them forever lost. Mostly his dreams are painful and disturbing as a number of times he sees his wife as sick and he himself did not take care of her and he sees her dying alone in darkness. On other moments his "dream bore the look of sacrifice" (27). Apart from these discomfoting flash backs from the past "there is no other dream nor other waking world and there is no other dream to tell" (27).

It is difficult to keep the memory of the good old time alive since the past grows increasingly distant. It is as if the man is experiencing "the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (3). The past as well as the present are slowly slipping away. As for looking toward the future the man finds out, "... there is no late ... This is later" (47). Although the father does not talk to the boy about the time before the catastrophe but the memory of the past keeps them moving, even if it is the memory of how and in what circumstances the boy's mother chose to die. She was pregnant when the world exploded, and the boy was born a few days after the mother and the father "watched distant cities burn." (47), ultimately she gave up and shot herself. "She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift" (49). The

remembrance of the times gone by soothes yet teases the father who feels a vacuum in his life after his wife's death. He is often transported to the good old times in his dreams. "Rich dreams now which he was loathe to wake from." (111). When he remembers his wife crossing the lawn early in the morning he feels that "each memory recalled must do some violence to its origin" (111). Once he lay listening to flocks of migratory birds and "he never heard them again" (45). Just like the music of the flute the singing birds and the eco of the notes from the past do not bring any comfort to the man. The fading away of good dreams, memories, music and songs of birds and the man's weariness with these states his distrust of time and things which in the past were believed to do these miracles for people.

Just the way memories of the past seem to be fading out the dreams also get blurred on waking up. "He tried to remember the dream but he could not. All that was left was the feeling of it." (130). The father's attitude towards memories and dreams which are considered comforting and soothing is ambivalent. In the world where he is surrounded by chaos and destruction the past has begun to haunt and hurt. It is seen when the man finds abundance of luxuries in the bunker it revives the memory of good old times and the memories of those days are painful. On finding comforts and luxuries in the bunker the man once wishes that he had never found this refuge "Some part of him always wished it to be over" (130).

The father "carved the boy a flute from a piece of roadside cane" (121) and gave it to his son. The father's feelings regarding the music are significant:

... the man could hear him playing. A formless music from age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin...the man thought he seems some sad and solitary changeling child announcing the arrival of a traveling spectacle in shire

and village who does not know that behind him the plays have all been carried off by wolves. (66)

The music of the flute reminds the father of the past that cannot be brought back except in memory. Later when the father asks the son about the flute he replies that he has thrown it away. Discarding the flute implies that just as memory and remembrance of the past is discomforting for the father it is disturbing for the son as well. When the notes of the flute (presenting harmony and peace which no longer exist) give no more pleasure, they are thus discarded.

The man's visit with his son to the house where he had spent his childhood reveals his longing for the innocence and peace of childhood that he has lost and nostalgia for the past. He asks his son whether he wants to see the house where his father has spent his childhood. But the son shows no interest in such an artifact with which he himself has no memories attached. While surveying the house the man remembers the time that he used to spend with his siblings and parents and the activities that they used to indulge in. When he was about to open the drawer, in the hope of finding some of the things that belong to his childhood the son says that he is scared and shows his unease at staying in the house for long as they might be caught by bad guys. The father apologizes to his son for having come to explore his house and also expresses his regret at coming there. The past has become a haunted house like the house where the man spent his childhood. Now only the ghosts of the loved ones inhabit the place where life, happiness and animation once dwelled.

At times the memories of the past seem a heavy burden to the man making his journey tiring and painful. It is evident from the act of discarding the billfold in which he carried many little things that belong to his past and remind him of the times and people that no longer exist. The billfold wore a hole in his trousers so one day he

empties out all the contents of it and lays them on the road. It contained money, credit cards, driver's license, and "picture of his wife" (44). He throws away these items in the woods "...and sat holding the photograph. Then he laid it down on the road also and then he stood and they went on" (44). The memories and possessions of a life that exists no longer are a torturing reminder of the loss that he has suffered. Laying down the picture of the wife shows that he wants to move forward and away from even the memories which haunt or slow him down or may pose a fear to him that he too might give up in the face of danger, the way his wife did.

When the man finds playing-cards in a house he tries to remember the rules of childhood games and was sure that he had them wrong so he made up new games with made up names. The man's inability to remember the rules and names of games shows the fading away of memory. For the man it feels that the loss of memory his inability to recall the past is painful in the moments when he wants to comfort and please his son. At other times, as mentioned earlier the peace and stability of the past seem to contrast with the wreckage and chaos of the present and he wishes to escape from the memories.

The child often asks the father about the world that he has not seen, the father finds it difficult to answer his son's queries. Earlier he used to make up stories and explain ideas but gradually he gives up on making things up because he believes those things were not true. Also telling about what no longer exists makes him regret the loss "... telling made him feel bad" (47).

The father is quite sure that there are no good guys left on earth. And he keeps telling his son the same who is compassionate towards the strangers whom the father fears. When the son suggests to his father that they can stay in the bunker where they found abundant food the father warns the boy that they are on the lookout. The son



mentions the possibility to be found by some good guys to which the father replies “Well I don’t think we’re likely to meet any good guys on the road” (127).

The father is skeptical about the possibility that any good guys exist on earth at present. He often tries to assure his son that they can’t help people lest they might harm them. Whereas the son is filled with a sense of compassion and sympathy for the desolate people they find on the road. The father outrightly denies the possibility of coming across good guys saying “... I don’t think we’re likely to meet any good guys on the road.” (127). The father’s utterance reveals his disappointment and loss of hope. On the other hand his reassurance to his son that they are carrying the fire and they are the good guys, reveals that he retains some hope and faith if not in the people and the world at least in himself. More importantly he is optimistic about his son’s survival, escape from evil forces and the possibility to move beyond the prevalent chaos. He is quite confident that they will not digress as they represent humanity and belief.

At another moment when the man remembers his last conversation with his wife in which they are arguing about his wife’s decision to end her life to escape destruction and cruelty by people who are ransacking and murdering people in the town, the man begs his wife not to leave in this way. “We’re survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp” (47). The man’s argument reveals that he has not lost hope as he calls himself a ‘survivor’. In a time when everything around them is crumbling and his wife bluntly tells him the harsh truth. “They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us...” (48). Still the man believes that they can face it together and that he can save and protect them from every harm. The wife decides to end her life and he decides to move forward toward an unknown destination with his son in a hope of finding peace.

Once when the boy says that he wishes that he were with his mother the father quickly retorts "you mustn't say that...it's a bad thing to say" (47). He expects his son not to lose hope. He believes that it is hope that has brought them this far and the reason of his own hope lies in his son. One night when the child wakes up from a dream and would not tell the father what the dream was the father assures the son that everything is all right. When the son still feels scared the father holding the son tells him "You can't give up. I won't let you" (160), showing how desperately and adamantly he believes in his ability to save the boy from harm and even from disappointment and fears. It also reveals his faith in his son to carry on with life the way he himself has done. In the face of danger and death he wishes to see his son exhibiting unflinching faith and courage.

According to the man, the good guys are those who "...keep trying". They don't give up" (116). When it comes to keeping his son's faith and hope alive the father states to his son the notions that he had been brought up with. When his son asks him about the good guys and that are they still the good guys, the man explains that they are as they are not giving up hope. When the father is on the verge of death and can no longer keep walking with the boy, he advises his son that he must go on. "You need to keep going. You don't know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You will be lucky again. You will see" (234). The father's optimism is reflected in his telling his son that they were lucky to have come this far despite the dangers and trying situations and though he may not be there with the boy to protect him, the boy will still find his way.

When the father mentions the possibility "There could be people alive someplace else" (205). The boy is skeptical and says that he does not think so. The father feels agitated at the boy's thought and his pessimistic view. He expresses his

hope at finding the people who will rescue them "There are people and we'll find them. You will see" (206). His optimism is unflinching when he thinks about their, especially his son's safety and survival. He must keep his boy alive no matter what.

In the face of the atrocities they witness, the boy and the man retain purity of hope and strength of vision that fuel them forward in their journey across the desolate land. In particular, the boy's capacity to believe in others' goodness is staggering. His spirit and hope remain resilient against the gruesome scenes he witnesses or experiences. Though the man is less trusting and more aware of the potential dangers of their journey, he too retains his humanity and does not stoop to imitate the deplorable acts committed by the thieves and cannibals. He has a moral resilience that trumps his mere survival instinct.

Not only does the man protect his son from death and danger, he also does his best to protect his hope and desire to live. Once when the boy says that he wishes that her were with his mom, implying that he wishes the he were dead the man tells him "Don't say it. It's a bad thing to say" (47). When the man feels that he has reached his end as his health is deteriorating and he cannot walk any further, he tells his son to keep going the way they both have been doing. "We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again. You will see" (234). The father is quite optimistic for his son that he will find the good guys on the road. The father also reiterates his own belief in goodness by reminding the son that he is carrying the fire "You have to carry the fire" (234). When the boy says that he does not know where the fire is. The father tells him that "It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (234). The father's faith and belief in his son's carrying the fire and light of goodness and civilization shows his optimism that he is optimistic and hopeful that his son will find for himself a better place and will survive to pursue what he has taught his son. The father's final words

to his son imply that no matter how bleak life seems, he must live life as if it has meaning, as if the forefathers are watching, as if there is always a line separating the good guys from the bad guys.

The protagonist of the novel despite being caught in a situation that is testing and nerve shaking, where the people around have succumbed to cannibalism, sticks to the metanarrative of religion that teaches triumph of faith. He instills in his son the idea of religion as a guide in the extreme face of adversity. His quest for survival is fueled by his unconditional love for his son. The metanarrative of patriarchy also appears to dominate the lives of the father and the son where the son submits to the authority of the father. The father believes he has adequate experience to guide his son through the present state of confusion and anarchy. The metanarrative of social conduct is also derived from religion. Even in the adverse situations the father and the son do not violate the human rights.

The father and son observe the boundaries between good and bad and also between man and boy. However the distinction between survival and savagery is difficult to be maintained. Though a number of times the father shrinks from helping the people in need, he makes sure that he does not harm anyone. The distinction between life and death is also getting blurred as life in the God forsaken wilderness has become the experience of death.

In the beginning when the man remembers the past he finds it comforting. But gradually the nostalgic effect of the good old times fades away. Remembering what no longer exists makes him feel more uncomfortable and sad. The father does not give up hope and wishes that his son will find a better world to live in. His belief that his son is the carrier of light reveals his faith and optimism

## CHAPTER 4

### VOWS AGAINST SOCIAL AND IDEATIONAL BOUNDARIES

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the major characters of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) with reference to their views and beliefs regarding the metanarratives prevalent in their society such as the notion of manliness, matriarchy and family, superstitions and family curse and breakdown of boundaries in their world. It also looks in detail whether the characters have an optimistic view of their life and future or they are nostalgic and long for the stability of the past.

#### 4.1. Characters' Adherence to Metanarratives

##### 4.1.1. Masculinity and Machismo

Oscar is a young Dominican man who is not living up to the notion of Latin hyper-manliness expected of him by his family and society. Oscar's plight throughout the novel is his inability to embody the role of the stereotypical Dominican male both physically and mentally. Commenting on Oscar's character Elizabeth Owuor calls him "a 'ghetto nerd' trapped in his own fantasies" ("Dominican Shadowboxes Past"). Oscar's sole ambition is to find a girl who returns his love but he does not have the necessary masculine qualities the society demands to achieve this. In Latin America the concept of masculinity has been dominated by the notion of 'machismo'—a

manliness that overpowers. The word machismo is defined as exaggerated manliness ("Machismo"). Masculinity is an ideology which is produced by its social context. It is earned through action, often violent action (Nurse 83). Masculinity is a component of identity which reveals profound insights about the world we live in as well as the beliefs that shape our world. Notions of what it means to be a man are imposed externally and function as social constructs masked as fundamental truths or Metanarratives.

All the male characters in the novel embody the notion of Dominican masculinity which presents the metanarrative that Oscar is also expected to follow. Oscar's uncle Rudolfo, who advised him to "grab a muchacha" (24) or a girl, is referred to as an expert in this regard who "had four kids with three different women" (24). He also has been to jail due to his involvement in some duel which establishes his status as a normal Dominican man—rough, strong and aggressive. Taking risks, getting involved in crime and enjoying a life of thrill and adventure is what is associated with the concept of machismo. This establishes their manliness and pride. Oscar's sweetheart Ana's boyfriend Manny was in army and got involved in drugs. Ana describes Manny's charms to Oscar and also that he becomes aggressive, controlling and even abusive. Oscar's roommate Yuniór is also a happy-go-lucky boy whose life revolves around befriending one girl after another and who never worries about issues of sincerity or being emotional in his relationships like Oscar. Yuniór is the epitome of Dominican Masculinity. Oscar's uncle Rudolfo also embodies the masculinity that Oscar seems to lack. Both Yuniór and Rudolfo often give Oscar tips on how to attract women and maintain control over them. Oscar, however, fails to act upon their advice.

The female characters in the novel also accept the dominating and aggressive behavior by men. They appear to follow the metanarrative of machismo instead of rebelling against it. Oscar is not liked for being emotional and sensitive by his mother and sister. His mother often loses her temper when she finds Oscar feeling weak and behaving like a girl instead of adopting aggression. Women follow the metanarrative of tough love as the mother advises Oscar to slap his girlfriend only then she will obey him. Oscar's school-time love "Maritza was a girl who seemed to delight in getting slapped around by her boyfriends" (18). Ana, another of his girlfriends also accepts her boyfriend Manny's controlling and abusive treatment. For these women it is difficult to separate the notion of love and violence. This is what they have observed around them and have experienced in their own lives. They expect men to be rough, violent, aggressive and even abusive. That is why Oscar's mother advises that Oscar must adopt aggression if he wants them to respect him. Ana leaves Oscar for not being tough and strong and prefers Manny over him who is dominating and harsh. Lola and Beli are treated roughly and are abused by their boyfriends. Yet the women consider the harsh treatment by men as normal because it is established in the Dominican culture that men are aggressive and dominating.

When Oscar was a kid he was referred to as a Casanova: "in those days he was (still) a 'normal' Dominican boy..." (12). He appeared to be successfully following the notion of machismo as he enjoyed the company of two girls at a time. His family and acquaintances encouraged his behavior. His mother's friends talked about and praised his display of manly qualities: "Look at that little macho ..." (14). As Oscar grows up he gets fat and has acne, and is seen as a nerd because of his interest in genres i.e., science fiction, comic books, and fantasy novels. His difficulties increase as he reaches high school. He weighs 245 pounds and is just a party watcher. "... in a

Dominican family: dude was supposed to have an atomic level G ... everybody noticed his lack of game and because they were Dominican everybody talked about it" (24). Oscar did try to improve his appearance and looks in order to get rid of his nerdiness and look like an average Dominican man. He removed his moustache and the glasses and started wearing lenses in an effort " ... to polish up what remained of his Dominicanness" (30). He began to imitate his cousins believing "... that in their Latin hypermanliness there might be an answer." (30).

Yunior tries to give advice to Oscar on how to get girls, but he also believes that Oscar is a nerd and too fat to attract a girl. In addition, Oscar does not want to change. Yunior takes him to running every day so that he could lose a little weight but after a few days, Oscar quits. He does not want Yunior's help to become normal because he knows he will never be normal. Instead, he just decides to be what he is and hopes that it will work for him in his goal of getting girls.

Oscar is not like the average Dominican men because he cannot handle women with confidence. In his relationships with women he does not show aggressive behavior towards them. His friends and family dictate to him the notion of masculinity prevalent in their society. They believe that Oscar cannot fulfill his desire of finding requited love without the necessary masculinity. He tries to convince both girls—Olga and Maritza—to date him at the same time, until Maritza warns him to get rid of Olga. Oscar cries over his trouble of being unsuccessful with girls. When his mother sees him crying and whimpering over his girl trouble she throws him to the floor telling him to slap Maritza and be rude with her only then she will respect him. However, Oscar cannot be aggressive. He decides to dump Olga, because "Maritza was beautiful and Olga was not" (15), and is dumped by Maritza later, because she found someone else more attractive than Oscar. Oscar cries, and is made fun of for



being gay. His family and friends advise him to change his habits and his looks if he wants to be liked by girls. His uncle Rudolfo advises Oscar to grab a girl, whereas his sister gives him more practical advice that he has to lose weight in order to attract girls.

The people around Oscar make him realize that he is not living up to the ideal of macho manliness that the Latin American men are known for. Oscar faces a situation similar to what Rafa, a character in Diaz's collection of short stories *Drown* (1996), comes across. Rafa demonstrates the way in which oppression over women acts as a means towards achieving patriarchal privilege. By dominating girls Rafa is proving his virility to himself and more importantly to those around him: his peers, his family and the society in general. Similarly Oscar has to find a girl and maintain a relationship with her not only because it is what he desires but also to establish his image in the society that he lives in that he is also a Dominican male—powerful, virile and capable of controlling women.

When Oscar is warned that Ybon's boyfriend would not spare Oscar he does not heed the warning. In such a critical situation any other man would have run away, but Oscar does not. His reckless attitude returns and he puts himself in serious danger. The Dominican cops are not to be messed with, but Oscar does not want to understand this. Even when Oscar's chances of escape from beating are so bleak, Oscar chooses not to heed the warning. Love cannot happen without violence in the place Oscar belongs to but Oscar attempts to defy these norms thus trying to challenge the metanarrative of his culture. Oscar is ready to risk his life in pursuit of his love Ybon who he thinks would "put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude" (183). Oscar is happy to tell his friend Yunion about his first kiss. The experience satisfies Oscar and confirms to him his long awaited entry into the clan of Dominican

men. On the same day Oscar experiences two passages into Dominican manhood, his first kiss and the first time he gets beaten.

Oscar is adamant on his decision to leave for Santo Domingo despite the fact that he had a narrow escape last time when Captain's men gave him a beating. His decision also shows that he is making one final effort to prove his manliness. If he gets Ybon and is able to free her from the present situation, winning her heart and making her a lady he would be assured of his virility thus he can remove the stigma of being a nerd and maricon.

Oscar has always been crazy about girls but through high school and college he has never been so much as kissed. It has to do with his being fat—weighing 300 pounds and also he is as nerdy as he is fat. Yunion tells about Oscar, "It would have been one thing if like some of the nerd boys I'd grown up with he hadn't cared about girls, but alas he was still the passionate enamorau who fell in love easily and deeply." (32)

Oscar's interest and preoccupation with genre: comic books, fantasy novels and science fiction is associated with his outsider status as a nerd. A.O Scott also relates Oscar's over indulgence in the speculative genres with his status as a nerd, commenting that "the pop-literary storehouse of myths and fantasies that sexually frustrated, socially maladjusted guys like him are widely believed to inhabit" (Scott, "Dreaming in Spanglish") further isolates Oscar from the society. Oscar admires "British nerd shows like Doctor Who and Blake's 7" (23). When he reaches college he makes the mistake of dressing up at Halloween in such a way that makes him resemble Oscar Wilde, who was an outcast in the society of his time for being homosexual. Oscar's college mates make fun of him and name him after Oscar Wilde due to his lack of machismo and being unsuccessful with girls. Oscar "Had no knack

for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap ... And most damning of all: no looks." (20). Oscar's life in college is similar to his life in high school. In college also he is unsuccessful in attracting girls. Oscar's bad luck with women, his lack of aggressiveness, and his obsession with comics characterize him as an outsider who does not fit in anywhere. "He couldn't dance, he didn't have loot, he didn't dress, he wasn't confident, he wasn't handsome, he wasn't from Europe, he wasn't fucking no island girl . . ." (279).

Oscar is extremely emotional. When Olga dumps him he cries and is made fun of by the school mates. They call him a *maricon*. Even his school bus driver, seeing him crying, tells him not to act like a baby. His mother also scolds him over his crying and whimpering over his troubles with girls. She commands him to act like a man. His emotionalism and extreme sensitivity is a hurdle in his achieving the qualities of machismo expected of him being a Dominican male. Oscar cries when he witnesses the fights between his sister Lola and his mother. Lola despite being a girl is strong and aggressive. During her growing up years she becomes defiant against her mother and seeks to get independence from her to explore and experience the world. Oscar on the other hand is submissive and lacks confidence to venture out in the world. "He was too weak for this hard new world" (43). Oscar watches tearfully the fight between his mother and sister, thus breaking the notion of macho manliness expected of him by the family and the society. The archetypal Latin men are powerful, virile and aggressive. Oscar, showing his weak side demonstrates that he lacks these qualities.

When Ybon's boyfriend Captain beats Oscar brutally and takes Ybon away Oscar feels the whole world collapsing around him. Oscar cries over his helplessness and suffering. He began to feel "impossibly alone" (297). At that moment again he felt that he is an utter failure in his pursuits as "He was boring, he was fat, and he was

so very afraid” (297). Oscar cries over his troubles as well as his own weaknesses. In the trying situations that he faces he fails to act in a manly manner and is defeated by the macho men.

During his sophomore year Oscar falls in love with a girl named Jenni. When Jenni gets a boyfriend and stops hanging out with Oscar, he gets really mad and acts irrationally. He freaks out, insults her and rips posters off the wall of her room. Being unsuccessful in love makes Oscar extremely depressed. One night he gets drunk and jumps off a railway bridge in an attempt to commit suicide. Just like his crying Oscar’s suicide attempt also reveals that he is weak. Despite his efforts to follow the metanarrative of manliness he fails to live up to the expected notion. He wishes that a girl would return his affections and love. Failure in love prompts Oscar to end his life. He seeks love and companionship of girls in order to be assured of his virility and manly pride.

Jenni leaves Oscar for Manny. She dumped Oscar because he is not like a macho man; the type Dominican women are attracted to. At this Oscar gets so disappointed and frustrated that he decides to commit suicide. The suicide attempt is prompted by Oscar’s failure to live up to the notion of machismo. The pain of rejection makes Oscar feel that he is not capable of getting what he desires; what comes naturally to other boys of his society is so hard for him to achieve. A girl’s rejection and her preference of a handsome and strong man over Oscar made him extremely frustrated. Oscar took it as society’s estimate of his personality and made the decision of committing suicide because of heartbreak and also because he failed to live up to the society’s standard for macho man.

Oscar’s suicide is also seen as an act of cowardice—what macho men do not display. It shows that Oscar is weak and emotional. Both these traits are found in

women. Being emotional is not considered a particularly manly characteristic. A man must fight in order to uphold his honor and status as a man. The attempt of suicide is an unacceptable behavior in a macho man, revealing his weakness and failure to cope with the situation which he is expected to control. The notion of machismo dictates to the Dominican men to be aggressive towards females to control them but Oscar could not make his girl friend submit before him. Instead of being violent towards her he inflicts injury to himself by attempting suicide.

#### **4.1.2. Violence**

The Dominican society, to which Oscar belongs follows the metanarrative of violence and considers it the most dominant sign of manliness. Oscar lacks the ability to fight or commit violence of any kind. Oscar is a Dominican-American nerd in New Jersey, and thus subject to additional expectations of machismo—from which the notion of violence cannot be separated. Oscar's uncle asks him to follow the metanarrative of masculinity and be violent with a girl if she does not submit to him. Oscar does not feel comfortable to maintain control over his girlfriends, and hesitates to use the traditional methods of handling women where he would be required to smack the girls around to make them love and respect him. Even as a child, Oscar is told that love is not possible without exercising some degree of violence. Following his uncle's advice would require Oscar to display aggression, which is seemingly impossible for him. The Dominican manliness is characterized by frequent and showy display of power and charm especially over women. An average Dominican man is physically attractive, sexually active and violent. Oscar is so sensitive and meek that it is very difficult for him to adopt the macho manliness and aggression that the average Dominican men practice. It is very hard for Oscar to follow the metanarrative of masculinity that dictates exhibiting aggression and violence towards women. One

noticeable change in Oscar which shows that he is beginning to act bravely is also prompted by his disappointment in finding love. It is the first step that Oscar takes for his entry into the macho community. When his friends Al and Miggs do not include Oscar in their scheme of getting girls, he really feels hurt. This prompts Oscar to change. He "... finally showed some backbone, hence some pride and although it hurt, it also felt ... good" (33). From here onwards Oscar began to show that he will start taking decisions and will fight for what he desires.

It is noticeable that Oscar's feelings towards his girlfriends are dominated by love, sensitivity and care. Whether it is Ana—his school time love or Ybon—his mature love, he is never abusive or harsh towards them. On the other hand Lola and Beli are treated roughly and are abused by their boyfriends. Yet the women consider the harsh treatment by men as normal because it is established in the Dominican culture that men are aggressive and dominating. Oscar's sensitivity towards his girlfriends and his lack of aggression show his reluctance of accepting of the metanarrative of male dominance, power and aggression as a sign of manliness. When Oscar visits Santo Domingo he falls in love with a semi-retired whore Ybon, who lives in the neighborhood of La Inca. Oscar and Ybon are never physically intimate even though this is what Oscar desires. He cannot come to terms with the notion of manliness that demands displays of exaggerated power or strength.

It is only when Oscar is in love with Ana that he begins to act out of anger. Once, he punches his friend Miggs during a role-playing argument. At another occasion, he takes his uncle Rudolfo's gun and waits for Manny—Ana's boyfriend—outside of his building without thinking about the risks involved in this act. When overpowered by love he shows some violent and self-destructive tendencies which reveals that Oscar despite his nerdiness does not go against the metanarrative of

violence as a means of achieving his goals. He adopts violence to be what the society holds as the most dominant sign of manliness.

Oscar adopts the metanarrative of violence in order to be what the society associates with manliness. He appears to become violent and aggressive not towards his beloved Ana but towards Manny who is controlling and abusive towards Ana. His love for Ana forces him to take the step where he is ready to risk his own life and to bring somebody else's life to an end. Despite his nerdiness he does not go against the metanarrative of violence as a means of achieving his goal. Machismo manifests itself in Oscar in a more violent and dangerous way. A real man must fight in order to uphold his honor and status. Being a coward Oscar is looked down upon, if he doesn't do this he faces ridicule for being weak. A man in the Dominican Republic can never be seen as less of a man.

#### **4.1.3. Fantasy Novels, Comics and Romanticism**

Fantasy novels and comics are narratives which authenticate and proliferate the notion of romanticism, which functions as a metanarrative. Oscar takes solace and refuge in the world of the comics and fantasy books that he reads. He imagines himself as a hero in the fantasy world of the literature that he reads when he finds himself incapable of fulfilling the notions of masculinity imposed upon him by his family and the Dominican culture. Oscar's love for the comic books, fantasy novels and science fiction is associated with his status as a nerd and an outsider in the society. He does not display the expected behavior, attitude and appearance that is practiced and liked in the real world. In order to cope with the disappointments he dwells in the fantastic world where he imagines himself as a hero. It shows that Oscar believes in the metanarrative of fantasy stories and comics where even a nerd or an outsider can be a hero. Oscar's enjoyment of these texts goes beyond his being a nerd.

Oscar's reading of these genres provides him an escape into a completely different world—a world where outsiders are the heroes, which mostly happens in comic books. Oscar aspires to be a science fiction writer and imagines himself as Dominican Tolkien, who was a famous writer. Real world personalities such as his friends Miggs and Al, clash with Oscar's naïve and romantic attitude towards life. He cannot watch the tragic endings of his favorite movies without crying.

Oscar's interest in fantasy novels shows that he is romantic. His romanticism is his metanarrative, like it is shown in quite a few movies that the nerd type finds and wins the girl. He believes in the metanarrative of romance and fairy tale endings. Believing in the notion of love that the movies and novels present, Oscar is ready to risk his life in pursuit of his love like a hero. He also believes that pursuing his love like a hero will "put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude" (183). Oscar tells Yunion about his first kiss with great happiness. The experience confirms to Oscar his entry into the manhood. When Oscar falls in love with Ybon he is repeatedly told by his family and Ybon herself that his life is in danger because Ybon's boyfriend is a Dominican cop who will not spare Oscar for trespassing into his territory. But Oscar does not heed the warnings and seems to be living in the fantasy world and imagining himself as a hero. He believes that after facing some hardships and violence he in the end will win his love defeating all opposition. His desire to marry Ybon, who is a semi-retired whore, may also be interpreted as his belief in metanarrative of romance where a hero falls in love with a so called bad woman, puts his own life in danger to save her from bad guys and turns her into a good woman.

Oscar's last speech that he utters before Captain's men shows Oscar's belief in the metanarrative of romance and fantasies. "He told them that what they were doing



was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world. Love was a rare thing, easily confused with a million other things ..." (321). He tells them that they are committing a grave crime as they are destroying a great love from the surface of the earth. And when they are about to die they will see him waiting on the other side, where he will not be a nerd but will emerge as a hero instead. "...there he'd be a hero, and avenger. Because anything you can dream...you can be" (321). "This clearly shows that he is being romantic, dying like a knight for the lady's love. Oscar's commitment to love and his escape from the reality show that he is a romantic. He holds his notions high and is ready to follow these despite all odds and adverse opposition.

#### **4.1.4. Love**

The notion of love that Oscar's friends and family are familiar with and which Oscar also hears about is all about spending time with girls and having physical pleasure. Love cannot be achieved without exerting violence in the part of the world Oscar belongs to. Oscar is repeatedly reminded by his friends and family that love is not possible without aggression, which he feels he can never be capable of.

Since his school time Oscar is in search of love. His uncouth appearance and nerdy personality are the hurdles in his way of getting a girl friend who could love him. Even though Oscar is not lucky in love he falls in love often. "Dude fell in love the way the rest of us fall asleep" (47) and unlike most of the other boys of his race and age, Oscar "would actually be heartbroken" (185) when rejected and is driven to madness by grief, loneliness and longing. The major reason of Oscar's frustration and disappointment in life is that unlike other boys in school he does not have a girl friend who loves him. It shows that he just wants to be in love. His longing for girls during his school years shows that he follows the metanarrative of romance associated with

teenage where teenagers are expected to have love affairs and girl friends and any one without one is an outcast.

It greatly adds to Oscar's disappointment and depression that he is not liked by girls and would die a virgin. This is unacceptable for Oscar and also a matter of great embarrassment as the Latino American men take great pride in their virility. Oscar's disappointment over his dying as a virgin proves that love for him is physical just as it is physical for his friends and acquaintances, so he is following the metanarrative that the society follows. When Oscar gets his first kiss he tells Yuniór about it with great pride, feeling a sense of achievement. Receiving his first kiss assured him of his being a normal Dominican man. It also reveals that just like other men of his society and race he also looks for the physical pleasure in love.

Oscar is often told by his family and friends that he has to get a girl by force. His humble attitude can never help him win a girl's favors. Oscar cannot be aggressive like the Dominican men. He longs for a relationship with girls and in his brief and unpromising relationships with a few girls he displays concern, compassion, care and sympathy towards them. During his school years when he was in love with Maritza and Olga at the same time he could not muster up courage to disappoint and leave either of the two, until Maritza warns him to leave Olga. Later when Oscar is rejected by both he cries over his disappointment. His mother commands him to adopt the Dominican attitude in love and handle girls with force and aggression. Oscar however could not heed to the advice, showing his soft side which ironically will always be a hurdle in his objective of finding love.

When Oscar falls in love with Ana, a classmate, he falls for her because she is intellectual and takes interest in his writings and readings. What they talk about is mostly poetry and literature. While he is dating Ana, and regularly goes out with her

to watch movies. One day he expresses with regret before Lola "I did not even get her scarf off" (39). Lola finds it shocking and remarks that like other Dominican men Oscar too cannot keep his hands off women. Oscar's sister gets annoyed that like average men Oscar also is looking for physical intimacy. Oscar's comment shows that despite his sensitivity and caring attitude he also subscribes to the notion of love that the men in his society follow.

Oscar is desperately in love with Ana but finds it hard to express. When Ana tells Oscar about her ex boyfriend Oscar feels really uncomfortable. Unfortunately for Oscar, Ana's boyfriend returns and her visits to Oscar become irregular. When Ana tells Oscar that Manny mistreats her and abuses her Oscar feels pain for Ana and asks her to break up with him, which she refuses to do as she is in love with Manny. She needed Oscar in her boyfriend's absence, just as someone to talk to. Ana's preference of Manny over Oscar shows that she also believes in the idea of tough love as Manny mistreats her and is demanding and aggressive still she claims to love him. Oscar despite being sympathetic and caring fails to hold Ana in a bond. Manny offered her the kind of love that is associated with the notion of machismo that the society has set up. Ana's rejection of Oscar throws light on the society's preferences and belief in the metanarrative of tough love and machismo. Oscar's lack of what Manny possesses leads to his failure to maintain desirable relationship with a girl.

It is Oscar's passion and love that gives him some power and courage to break free from his nerdy demeanour. Oscar begins to fight with his friends over his relationship with Ana. Once he punches Miggs during a role-playing game. Oscar who had never been aggressive begins to act out and show some aggression. Although Oscar gets enough courage to profess his love for Ana but she does not admit to loving him back. When Oscar comes to know that Manny beats and abuses Ana he

gets so infuriated that he takes his Uncle Rudolfo's gun and waits for Manny outside his building without thinking about the risks involved in the act and its repercussions. It also reveals Oscar's belief in the metanarrative of romantic notion of love that he reads about in fantasy novels in which the innocent and simple boy acts out in aggression in order to save his beloved and eventually wins her heart. This incident also reveals that Oscar may show violent and self-destructive tendencies in order to act like a macho man.

During his sophomore years Oscar falls in love with Jenni, with whom he shares his writings and common interest in poetry and literature. Oscar begins taking care of himself and starts jogging again. He works out to lose weight in order to impress Jenni, showing that he too believes in the metanarrative prevalent in the society that considers appearance and looks as important ingredients in winning love and impressing girls. Oscar's happiness in love is short-lived. One day he finds out that Jenni is cheating on him. Seeing her with another boy makes Oscar lose his temper and he tears down the posters of her walls and gets so distracted that his friend had to lock him up in their room to stop him from doing further damage. After his failure in love Oscar is so heartbroken that he decides to commit suicide. Oscar's suicide attempt is another manifestation of the way he behaves in love, as demonstrated by his rash behavior when he was in love with Ana where he had put his life in danger by attempting to kill Manny. When Jenni cheats on him Oscar makes another rash decision of committing suicide. This is another evidence of Oscar's romantic notion of love where he feels the whole world has come to an end with the end of his love and the breaking up of his trust. Oscar's romantic notion of love is in contradiction with the real life relationships of love in the society which Oscar belongs to. Along with physical intimacy he also expects love and sincerity which is

hard to be found in the people of his age for whom love is pleasure and adventure rather than a commitment. The fantasy books and fiction that he reads present the notion of love and life which contradicts with reality. Jenni just like Ana breaks up with Oscar when she finds a handsome and tough guy who unlike Oscar is neither caring nor sympathetic but has charisma and aggression that makes him a macho man. Jenni's preference for a rough man also confirms the society's metanarrative of love that women fall for tough macho men even though they are hard to please.

When Oscar visits Santo Domingo in summer holidays he falls in love with a semiretired whore Ybon. Oscar becomes lovesick and that too to the extent that he even stops writing because he cannot think of anything else except Ybon and visits Ybon at her house every day. Despite La Inca and his mother's reprimanding he does not stop visiting her. He listens to Ybon's heart wrenching stories that she tells him about her past. He once suggested to her that they should get married. It shows that he believes in the metanarrative of marriage and family. He fantasizes about a peaceful family life. Oscar's feelings for Ybon and his treatment of her are filled with compassion and care. Despite the fact that she is a whore Oscar does not mistreat her or take advantage of her. His desire to marry may also be interpreted as his belief in the metanarrative of romance where a hero takes a so called bad woman and giving her respect turns her into a good woman which is the theme of so many movies and fiction that Oscar reads.

Despite all opposition and advice Oscar pursues his fantasy where he sees himself as a man rescuing his lady love paying no heed to the risks involved in the act. When Oscar leaves for Santo Domingo for the last time he appears much at peace with himself and it seems that he has decided to take a plunge for his love no matter what. When in Santo Domingo, his mother shows exasperation over Oscar's

irresponsible behavior of trying to get himself killed by getting involved with Ybon. Oscar replies, "That is not what I'm trying to do" (319). Although death may not be what Oscar is willing to embrace, Oscar seems to have a clear idea that this is probably what is going to happen to him. Love gives Oscar power. No one can stop him from pursuing Ybon, neither the love of his family including his mother, his sister and La Inca whom he claims to love a lot, nor the threat and violence that he has already suffered by Ybon's boyfriend Captain. Even La Inca, who has previously demonstrated divine powers by helping to save Oscar through her prayers, cannot influence Oscar because something had changed in him which is evident through his action of leaving for Santo Domingo for Ybon despite the fact the he knows that his life is in danger. Oscar's taking risk for his love shows that he is trying to act like a hero—a macho man who can save his beloved by showing his bravery and skill in fighting with forces more powerful than him. His struggle and sacrifice for Ybon is absurd at one level. It shows that he believes in the metanarrative of romance that's why he is behaving so recklessly, imagining himself to be a knight prepared to die for his lady. Believing himself to be an agent fighting against the evil forces and upholding the notion of good. Also he is a little like Don Quixote who became obsessed with reading and believed in every fantastic and impossible situation that he read in books.

Oscar feels that he has found transcendent love when he falls in love with Ybon. When Captain's men catch Oscar the second time, he does not cry. He tells the two men that what they are doing is wrong because they are destroying a great love that ever existed in the world. They take him to the cane field and Oscar knows that he cannot escape the beating and can even die there. He sends his last telepathic goodbye messages to his mother, to his sister Lola, to his uncle and to all the girls he

ever loved. In the message sent to Ybon, which is a quote from the *Fantastic Four*, he assures Ybon that his love will never desert her and she will never be alone. Although Oscar's speech is an effort to convince his assailants of his innocence, an attempt to save himself from imminent death, it also shows that he feels that he is dying for a cause for he believes in love and has found true love. This also confirms Oscar's belief in the metanarrative of romance. He feels he would be a martyr if he dies in the cause of true love.

Oscar's sister Lola is also in search of love but unlike Oscar she goes through intimate relationships earlier in her teen age. After a fight with her mother over her rebelliousness she decides to run away from home in order to be with her boyfriend Aldo. When the initial charm of living with Aldo fades out Lola begins to feel miserable and bored. She figures out soon that this is not the love and life that she was looking for as she terms her loss of innocence as "the stupidest thing" (64) that she ever did. She believed in the notion prevalent among teens i.e. love is rebellion and adventure. And now she is subscribing to the mature idea that love is reckless and perhaps a mistake.

#### **4.1.5. Matriarchy and Family**

Oscar despite being a nerd believes in the metanarrative of family and patriarchy. When Oscar's sister Lola runs from home, she calls home and talks to Oscar and does not want their mother to know where she is living at the moment. One day when she meets Oscar at a coffee shop to get some clothes and money Oscar shows up with their mother and their aunt and uncle so that they can take Lola home. Oscar's act of not supporting his sister shows that Oscar despite being unmanly and a nerd is following the metanarrative of patriarchal male and reveals his belief in the metanarrative of family as a protector. Oscar cannot help crying when he sees his

mother and sister fighting. He cares a lot for his sister. When she runs away from home he is extremely worried about her that is why when she secretly asks him for help, Oscar takes their mother and uncle to the place where she had asked him to meet her. He does so in order to protect his sister so that they can take her back home thereby revealing his belief in the metanarrative of family as a protector. The step that Oscar takes to protect his sister also shows his attempt to act as a patriarch of the family.

Oscar's mother Belicia—a single mother who has had to struggle maintaining two jobs despite her illness to raise her kids—is a matriarch, who holds the family together. She is dominating and powerful when it comes to controlling her children—Lola and Oscar. Belicia's concern and struggle for her children reveals that as a matriarch and the head of the family she is following the metanarrative of patriarchy. Facing all odds she is proving herself to be the head of the family despite illness and other problems. Cancer has taken away a part of what makes her a female. She has shed away her femininity to take on the role of matriarch which is quite close to that of a patriarch. Her loss of femininity is to parallel her adoption of the manly qualities of looking after the family. She is not just a care-giver but also a bread-earner, protector and decision maker.

Belicia is a typical matriarch who can do anything to protect her family. She realizes Lola's act of running away from home at the age of fifteen is prompted by her silliness and immaturity. When she sees Lola running at seeing her mother and Uncle with Oscar she falls and begins to cry out for her. In order to stop her daughter from leaving Beli pretends to be getting hysteric and Lola thinking that her mother would faint comes back. Beli is a typical matriarch as she accepts Lola back in the family



fold. Despite Lola's disobedience Beli forgives her. Her generosity and forgiveness is what only a matriarch can demonstrate.

Beli as a matriarch takes all the decisions and her children follow these. She decides to send Lola to Santo Domingo to live in the care of La Inca and continue her studies. Lola has to obey her mother as she has failed in her earlier attempts of escape from the mother and the family. And the lessons learned are also hard for her to forget. What Lola reports about her mother is the image of her mother as aggressive, harsh and cruel head of the family. But Beli's aggression and tyrannical parenting is in fact her method of controlling her daughter and also her son from the troubles of the outside world. Beli is harsh with Lola because she wants her to grow up as an obedient girl and wants her to fit in the society where men have power.

Lola wants to enjoy freedom when she enters into her teens. Due to her mother's constant insults and scolding Lola begins to indulge in fights with her mother showing signs of rebellion against the dominating matriarch of the family. She sees her mother's cancer as an opportunity to rebel and break free from her hold and be wild. After running away from home and defying her mother she comes to miss the protection and presence of family. Now she regrets running away and realizes losing her innocence as "the stupidest thing" (64) she ever did. When she gets bored with her life with Aldo she hopes that her family will put up fliers looking for her. Lola rebels against the dominant metanarrative of family and values and later finds herself craving for the same. She wishes her family is putting up fliers because she believes in the metanarrative of family as a protector, forgiving and forgetting and the bond of family. Lola has a strong love for her family and home despite her attempts to rebel against her mother and to run away from home. She worries for her brother and misses him when away from him. When she leaves home she begins to miss even her

mother's cruelty. It shows she believes in the metanarrative of family and patriarchy where the head of the family is always right hence she realizes that even cruelty is the parent's right.

The characters appear to submit to and follow the roles of males and females which are assigned to them by their society. Beli wants her son and daughter to learn to fit into their gender roles. She wants Oscar to go outdoors and play instead of being engrossed in reading comics and watching movies: "You ain't a woman to be staying in the house" (22). She is scared of Lola's rebelliousness and commands her to tame herself. Oscar also has awareness of his role as a patriarch as he does not help Lola when she runs from home and takes his family with him in order to take Lola back home. It shows that Oscar conforms to the rules of the society where women are the responsibility of the family and are protected by the elders and the males.

#### **4.1.6. Family Curse and Superstition**

The curse called *fuku* is said to have decimated Oscar's family in one form or another for generations. "Oscar's clan has experienced a long run of terrible luck — murders, torture, exodus from their native Dominican Republic — which they blame on *fukú*, an ancient curse" (Reese). Oscar does not take the stories of the family curse, which La Inca tells him, seriously. He comments in a nonchalant manner "What Latino family doesn't think it's cursed?" (32). He is so fed up of these stories that he never found them "worth incorporating in his fiction" (32).

Oscar wishes to continue his friendship with Ana, despite the return of Ana's ex boyfriend, because he is hopelessly in love, which is a tradition and a curse in his family. Oscar's grandfather is said to have turned insane and ended up in prison. His grandmother Nena Inca lost her husband six months after they got married and she never looked at another man after him. Oscar's mother is also said to be unlucky in

love and "It almost killed her. And now it was Oscar's turn" (45). Oscar had a dream in which he sees his sister welcoming him to "the real family" (45). The uncanny feeling that Oscar was having was telling him that he too is going to have the same fate as his ancestors and it all is due to the curse—fuku.

When Yunion moves in with Oscar, Oscar tells him he is cursed, which has doomed him, like his mother, to lasting unhappiness in love. After his disappointment in love with Jenni Oscar starts drinking more regularly and walks onto a train bridge. Oscar leaves a suicide note for Yunion, Lola, Beli and Jenni. When the train is coming, Oscar sees the Golden Mongoose, an imaginary animal, they look into each other's eyes, and then the Mongoose disappears. He jumps off the bridge and lands on the median and survives. While in the hospital Oscar tells Yunion he believes the curse made him do it. Oscar comes around to believing in the metanarrative of the family curse after his disappointment in love, which made him take the extreme step of committing suicide. Oscar's extraordinary experience when he survives after the attempted suicide convinces him of the authenticity of the curse in which he did not believe earlier. The Mongoose also appears in Beli's dream when she faced a beating almost to the point of death and the Mongoose with golden lion eyes gave her the tidings of her kids—Oscar and Lola. Oscar also feels that he has been saved by the amiable Mongoose which also serves as *zafa* (counter spell of Fuku) of sorts.

Oscar realizes that he is so much in love with Ybon that he has again reached the point where bad things could happen. A few days later Ybon's boyfriend, referred to as the Captain, returns he threatens Oscar to leave Ybon by shooting at night in front of Oscar's house. Ybon also hints to Oscar that they should meet less frequently. But he does not heed any of the warnings. One day Captain follows Oscar and Ybon. Captain's men take Oscar to a cane field and beat him brutally. Oscar is sure that a

third faceless man is there with his assailants. Oscar survives miraculously. While in the hospital Oscar has a dream in which he sees the golden Mongoose asking him if he wants more or less. Oscar's first reply is less, but then he thinks of his family, especially his sister, mother and Nena Inca and asks for more. This means that he chooses to live. Oscar lays unconscious in the hospital for three days. He later remembers that the dream he had right before he regained consciousness was of an old man in a mask holding up a blank book. This is the same faceless man that also appeared in his mother's visions when she was going through a similar phase like Oscar. Oscar does not want to leave Santo Domingo, despite his mother's constant pleading, because he loves Ybon. Oscar is still in terrible pain from the beating. He realizes that the family curse may actually be true, which he previously did not believe in. He says Fuku out loud. The faceless man appears at the time when Oscar undergoes the beating in the cane field, indicating that the beating is part of the fuku. The Mongoose also appears again, this time in Oscar's dream. As Oscar's personal guardian angel, or perhaps as a harbinger of zafa—the counter spell for Fuku. The Mongoose offers "more or less" (301) to Oscar. Less would mean death and more would mean that Oscar would continue to face the family curse. Oscar's choosing more shows his belief in the curse as well as his forbearance and courage.

After the terrible incident of beating and torture of Oscar by Captain's men, Oscars' family takes him back to New Jersey but he is determined to be united with his love, Ybon. Without caring for the danger involved in his decision, Oscar flies back to Santo Domingo. He says the "Ancient Powers" (315) compelled him to go. On the way in a brief vision, Oscar sees all of his family, including his dead grandparents. He sees them getting on a bus which is driven by the Mongoose and the man without a face is the conductor on the bus.

When faced with disappointments Oscar begins to believe that he is unlucky in love. Through his experiences in life Oscar comes around from not believing in the metanarrative of superstition and curse to believing in it. Despite his sincere emotions and efforts to have a relationship and win love of a girl he faces embarrassment and rejection which prompts him to commit suicide. When Oscar's mother mentions to Oscar that he has inherited her looks and wishes that he should not get her luck Oscar does not know what she is talking about. He considers himself a common Dominican boy growing up in America enjoying opportunities and freedom. Whereas his mother realizes that their family is cursed and her children will carry the curse no matter where they live or what they do. Oscar's life takes on the same pattern that her mother's life had. He mentions to his friend Yunion that he may be living under the influence of family curse which has doomed him, like his mother, to lasting unhappiness in love. "Dude used to say he was cursed, used to say this a lot" (171).

Oscar's disappointments in love which he considers are due to his bad luck, give him a deeper understanding of the family curse and teach him that the children of the immigrants cannot escape nor can they deny the terrible past that their parents and grandparents endured in the old country.

Just like Oscar, Lola also comes across experiencing the influence of some supernatural powers, despite her rejection of the traditional and stereotypical notions about family curse and superstition. When Lola's mother takes her hand and makes her feel the cancerous lump in her breast Lola feels a premonition which she calls a *bruja* or a witch feeling, explaining that in that moment she felt that something in her life is going to change. Soon after that her mother's chemotherapy starts and Lola becomes defiant and rebellious and begins to enjoy freedom from her mother's influence over her.

Lola's stay at Santo Domingo with La Inca brings her closer to the family history. It allows Lola to connect with her ancestry and with the source of the fuku. When Lola listens to the stories of her mother Belicia and her grandfather Abelard she feels she is satisfying the bruja feeling in her. She relates with this the feelings of stopping the family curse. However, Lola states that she does not believe in fuku, "I don't think there are any such things as curses. I think there is only life. That's enough" (205), yet she seems to have a place in its dissolution.

#### **4.2. Breakdown of Boundaries**

Postmodernism discards boundaries between classes and cultures, rejecting rigid distinctions supporting plurality and heterogeneity. Postmodernism is believed to be an age of globalization, creolization, social mobs, democracy and collective life forms. Keeping in view the postmodernist view point below is given an analysis of the characters in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to discuss how prevalent the breakdown of boundaries in their world is, and whether or not the distinctions between local and outsider, regular and nerd, and man and woman, are rigid and water tight compartments.

##### **4.2.1 Local / Outsider**

Oscar is the outsider in the society mostly due to his nerdiness, his lack of macho manliness, his grotesque physical appearance and his interest in genres. He is repeatedly told that he does not represent his community or his nation. At school other boys of color tease him and say "You are not Dominican" (49). Oscar's mother Belicia migrated to the United States of America from the Dominican Republic. Oscar and his sister Lola feel the effects of diasporic movement while growing up in New Jersey. Living in the United States they are physically separated from their country of origin but they still feel a strong affiliation with their country. Every summer Oscar

and his family visit Santo Domingo. Oscar as the immigrant is the outsider in United States. He is an outsider in his own country as well as in the new country. He is no longer in his native country, nor is he a part of the new country, that his family migrated to. "You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest" (22).

Christopher Tayler opines that Oscar "...justly sees himself as a doubly marginalised figure. A Dominican-American growing up in Paterson, New Jersey ... hampered by his counter-stereotypical nerdiness as well as problems of race and class" (Tayler "Oscar Wao"). When Oscar goes to Santo Domingo he is perceived as an outsider since he does not exhibit violent and aggressive behavior that men in his native country are known to display. Oscar's naivety is termed as his being unDominican. When Oscar faces the violence of Ybon's boyfriend Captain, "he blurted out I am an American Citizen" (295) thus confirming before a local his own status as an outsider.

#### **4.2.2. Regular / Nerd**

Many things make Oscar stand outside the circle of a regular male. His machismo deficiency, his nerdiness and his enormous weight put him outside the boundaries where he cannot enjoy the status of a regular man. He is labeled as a nerd by his school mates and is made fun of for being overweight, awkward, overly cerebral and uncool. Oscar's obsession with fantasy games, comic books and Japanese animation mark him as an archetypal "otaku" or a geek. Despite swearing before Lola and Yunion to change his nerdy look he continues to eat excessively, use high sounding nerd or flash words, also he does not commit himself to exercise regime. Even after two semesters he had no friends in the campus but his sister. Out of

desperation "... he joins the university's resident geek organization" (50). But more than anything else it is his lack of machismo that makes him look like a nerd in the circle of Dominican men. Oscar's status as an outcast on being a nerd shows that the society does not accept in its fold, those who do not live up to the expectations and established notion. Dominican males are expected to display hypermanliness whereas Oscar does not even show the signs of manly behaviour. Thus he is termed a nerd and also a maricon as he cannot attract girls.

Keeping in view the prevalent notion of manliness, that would qualify him to enjoy the status of a Dominican macho man, Oscar makes every possible effort to remove this tag; from losing weight to showing aggressing against the antagonists who appear to take away from Oscar his hard earned love. His decisions and actions reveal that he realizes that the boundaries exist in the society and in order to assure his survival in it he has to make an effort to shed the status of a nerd.

#### **4.2.3. Male / Female**

In the part of the world that Oscar belongs to, fates are determined by sexuality. Sex is a key ingredient in the lives of the Dominican people. Oscar's lack of machismo puts him outside the circles of Dominican males thus depriving him of every opportunity of success in love and life. In the Dominican culture men as the patriarchs are expected to exhibit power and substance. They do so by suppressing and controlling women. When Oscar shows lack of masculinity in his behavior and action he is made fun of and is referred to as maricon or gay. Oscar's mother repeatedly commands him to adopt the ways and habits of a man. She scolds him whenever he cries and wants him to be aggressive as this is how men typically behave. It shows that strict boundaries are enforced and males and females are



required to observe them. Anyone showing deviant behavior is considered a misfit or an outcast.

All through his life Oscar undergoes a constant struggle to establish his masculinity and power and to show to the world that he is a Dominican man. More importantly Oscar's survival in the society depends on his achieving machismo. He struggles to cast away the label of nerd, geek, sissy and maricon. Thus confirming that gender is not a state in which a person is born but it is earned and maintained through one's actions and behavior. Oscar has to show through his attitude that he is virile, powerful and manly. His mother and sister keep pressing Oscar about his lack of manliness and often persuade him to come out of his nerdy shell which keeps him on the side of femininity, and enter into the male world if he wishes to get a girlfriend.

Oscar's sister Lola describes her experience of witnessing her mother losing her femininity due to cancer. She states her mother lost her feminine attraction after her mastectomy and her loss of hair due to chemotherapy. Her mother's possession of feminine features is what establishes her identity as a woman and losing it would make her lose her identity. Lola's mother hushes her up on speaking about the experience of abuse in childhood by an older male neighbour. It shows that she considers this treatment or mistreatment normal as women undergo suffering and abuse due to men's rights over them. To Lola her own and her mother's experiences define their status and role as a woman which cannot overlap or be the same as those of men in their society. At the age of fourteen Lola "...shaved her head down to the bone ... and ... their mother, was convinced she'd turned into a lesbiana" (37). Her mother calls her ugly and asks her to wear a wig which Lola burns. Her mother's annoyance at her daughter's move of cutting off her hair and her forcing Lola to wear a wig till her hair grow back, shows that she wants to see her daughter following the

stereotypical image of a girl in the Dominican society where physical appearance and beauty is all through which women are judged and liked. Lola's haircut parallels Belicia's mastectomy, both of these physical attributes are symbols of femininity. The mother fears that her daughter's loss of hair would put her outside the circles of females, for she herself has experienced losing feminine powers after her mastectomy and loss of hair due to chemotherapy.

#### **4.3. Nostalgia and Optimism**

Oscar's nerdiness is associated with his interest in genres—science fiction, fantasy, comic books and role playing games. One of his favorite role playing games is Dungeons and Dragons. Fans of this game are stereotyped as nerdy and uncool. This highlights Oscar's status as a social outcast. Oscar's enjoyment of these texts goes beyond being a nerd. These genres allow Oscar to escape into a completely different world, one where outsiders are the heroes, which is often the case in comic books. His preoccupation with reading comic books and science fiction allows him to escape from the world where he finds himself to be a misfit. He imagines himself to be a popular and powerful hero like the ones he reads about e.g. Shazam, Oscar's favorite super hero. He pretends to be Shazam when talking to girls. Oscar's idealization of the super hero highlights his deep desire to emerge from his nerdy shell as a confident and macho man. Despite the fact that his family and friends tell him that his nerdiness will not help him in achieving his goals he is sticking to it and is trying to make it work.

Oscar writes stories and puts signs in fantasy language on the door of the dormitory that he shares with Yuniór. Yuniór often finds Oscar watching *Akira*, a Japanese post-apocalyptic film. In college when Oscar falls in love with Jennie their conversations are dominated by talk about poetry and literature. Which reveals that he

believes in the romanticism of literature and stories that show optimism and hope as the strings which human life hinges upon. Oscar is not old enough to be nostalgic or he does not really have a good past to re-live so his genre writing and fantasies are substitutes for nostalgia.

Oscar longs for his home in Santo Domingo. He moves back home after he graduates and gets a job as a teacher at his old high school. After three years of teaching Oscar decides to visit Santo Domingo. Oscar had forgotten how much he loved about being in Santo Domingo. He calls it Heaven, but his cousin disagrees, calling it "un maldito infierno" (275) meaning 'this here is a damned hell'. Oscar's love for his home town and country states that he is nostalgic about the old time and the place he moved away from. Now his life in New Jersey and his preoccupations make him miss the very native soil and roots that he belongs to. While staying here Oscar comes to know about Lola's history of living with La Inca, and more. He decides that instead of going home with Lola he is going to stay there with his mother for another month.

In his "apocalyptic daydreams" (27) he always imagines himself to be a super hero or a celebrity who enjoys immense power and popularity. Oscar's sister Lola's friends often pass slighting comments about his lacking manliness and his having no power to attract girls. "In his dreams he was either saving them from aliens or he was returning to the neighbourhood, rich and famous" (27). His imagination would often lead him to create stories where he is saving the girl (who in reality dumped him) from nuclear bombs and "from a pack of irradiated ghouls and together they would set out across a ravaged America in search of a better tomorrow" (27). Oscar writes two books which are about "... a young man fighting mutants at the end of the world..."

(32). Writing science fiction and fantasy stories provides Oscar with a means of escape.

Oscar is optimistic in his view of love. He feels that his passion and persistence can make him achieve his love. When Captain's men take Oscar to the fields for beating he tells them that what they are doing is wrong as they are destroying and removing a great love from the surface of the earth. And when they are about to die they will see him waiting on the other side, where he will not be a nerd but will be a hero instead. Despite the fact that Oscar knows about the dangers involved in his pursuing the relationship with Ybon after her boyfriend's return Oscar wishes for things to change. His mother warns him telling him straight away that if he does not heed her advice it would lead to serious trouble for the whole family. She tells Oscar that he is bent upon killing himself. Oscar takes the plunge not because he is fed up with life and thinks love a means to escape the pangs of the world that does not accept him, but because he believes "... anything you can dream ... you can be" (321).

Oscar does not live up to the metanarrative of masculinity and violence that is why he is referred to as a nerd by his schoolmates. He learns through his disappointments to be aggressive and violent to achieve his goals. He believes in the metanarrative of stories and comics which is evident from his venturing out in danger like a hero to save and get his beloved. He believes in the metanarrative of love, family and patriarchy and considers family a supporting unit. Initially Oscar did not believe in the family curse but after undergoing painful experiences he comes to believe in it.

The boundaries between local and outsider, nerd and regular and male and female are preserved in Oscar's world. He is a Dominican in America, thus an

outsider on the basis of race. His nerdiness excludes him from the circles of macho men. His lack of aggression and his crying is seen a sign of femininity. Unfulfilled dreams, unrequited love and increasingly listless life are what Oscar had been through. It is not exactly what Oscar dreamed of as a kid. Despite the fact that Oscar faced many disappointments in his life he does not give up and keeps trying till his last breath to achieve his goal that is to find true love.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

We are living in an era where a postmodern perspective on self has been accepted as an adequate description of human condition. The major postmodern ideas are believed to define and exhibit the human perspective on life in general as if every person living in the world today holds postmodern sense of self that is constructed in relation to the world which one inhabits. Because of the assumption that postmodernist theory is contemporary and that contemporary fiction is postmodernist not much work has been done to find newer elements in fiction, elements that flout postmodernist characteristics. The study aimed at investigating the world views of the characters that appear in the novels of the new millennium; what ideals do they hold and how do they view the world that they inhabit, whether they follow the postmodern perspective or challenge it. The notions of postmodern theory that were explored and investigated included: characters views on metanarratives, their observance of boundaries in their world and if the characters hold optimistic view of the world or they exhibit nostalgia for the stability of the past.

The theoretical framework for the study was devised by drawing upon the theory of postmodernism. The study takes into account the three basic tenets of postmodernism which include, "incredulity towards metanarrative" (Lyotard xxiv) which asserts that there is disregard towards all encompassing and totalizing beliefs

and theories in the postmodern era. The idea of blurring of distinctions and heterogeneity that can be distilled from another postmodern theorist Derrida's work is another aspect of postmodern theory which the research seeks to investigate. Another postmodern assertion that postmodern culture and writings exhibit nostalgia forms the basis for investigation of characters' views in the present study. Keeping these three postmodernist notions as a yard stick for the analysis of the characters' world views in the novels of the new millennium the study performed a qualitative and descriptive analysis which at the same time is predictive of the trends to come.

In the light of the analysis of the characters in the novels, McCarthy's *The Road* and Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the following findings and conclusions have been drawn which will help in generalizing about the nature and world views of the characters that appear in the novels in the present age.

## **5.1. Metanarratives**

### **5.1.1. *The Road***

In *The Road* the metanarrative of religion is still intact. The father in the novel despite being caught in the wretched landscape of the post-apocalyptic world adheres to the old beliefs. The man is either in search of fire or keeps lighting fire in order to assure his and his son's survival. He considers himself an apostle on a pilgrimage. In a world bombarded with chaos and destruction brought by the sins and lawlessness, the father's efforts to stick to the norms of the old system of religious beliefs and social norms are evidence of his belief in the metanarrative of religion and religion as guide which teaches goodness of conduct.

The father is strongly aware of keeping a distinction between them and the bad guys. The man abides by the metanarratives of goodness and cleanliness. He makes sure that he and the boy are tidy and do not resemble the *bad guys* in their appearance.

On a few occasions when the father and his son's lives are in danger the father shrinks from helping the ones in need. The father justifies his act of not helping others as an act of self defence. The notion of good and bad is derived from religion. When it changes to suit circumstances it is still religious in essence.

The man's thirst for survival is fueled by the love for his son. His weariness and distrust toward others stem primarily out of his drive to protect his son. He wishes to save his son from civilization's destruction, rape, murder, and cannibalism and to do so he puts his own life in danger. The small treats and sacrifices that the father offers to his son are strong examples of his love. While the man may expect his own death, he lives in order to seek life for his son.

The metanarrative of patriarchy is also dominant in the lives of the man and the boy. The father is the typical patriarch who makes decisions, teaches and protects his son. The son also follows his father despite the fact that on certain occasions he does not agree with his father's ideas. The father not only protects his son but he also decides everything for his son and expects his son to follow his commands even when he dies.

The man pledges to observe human rights even in the face of extreme hunger and need and does not usurp others' rights. When he finds food in a bunker he realizes that he is trespassing on somebody else's property and consuming their food therefore asks for forgiveness. The father and son do not kill or steal from the living. They help where it is possible for them to do so and most importantly they don't eat other people. It shows that the notion of social conduct is also derived from religion and they stick to it even in adverse circumstance.

Storytelling for the man is a means of bringing back the past that shows his nostalgia for the bygone times. The boy does not believe in the metanarrative of



stories as well as the authenticity of the past as he says that the stories that his father tells him are not true.

### 5.1.2. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Oscar does not live up to the metanarrative of masculinity or machismo despite the fact that he desires to assert his manliness and gain social acceptance. Though he does not like being aggressive with girls in order to maintain a relationship, which the notion of machismo dictates, still he feels that in order to prove his virility he has to come out of his nerdy shell. Oscar's habit of crying and his attempt of committing suicide reveal that he is weak and emotional, traits that macho men do not possess or display.

Oscar cannot commit violence of any kind despite the fact that his family and friends tell him that securing love without exercising violence is impossible. Oscar learns through his disappointments and experiences to be aggressive in situations where he is expected to show his manliness and power. It is only when Oscar is in love that he risks his own life and ventures out to face the world and its dangers. Oscar despite his nerdiness does not go against the metanarrative of violence as a means of achieving his goals. He adopts violence, what the society holds as the most dominant sign of manliness, to be a macho man.

Oscar takes refuge in the world of comics and fantasy novels. He imagines himself as the hero of the fantasy novels and the comics that he reads. He wishes to be a science fiction writer. It shows that Oscar believes in the metanarrative of fantasy stories and comics where even a nerd or an outsider can be a hero. His interest in fantasy books and comics shows that he is a romantic. Oscar's romanticism is evident when he risks his life for his love, Ybon, considering himself a hero who can rescue his lady, and lands in grave danger.

His longing for girls during his school years shows that he follows the metanarrative<sup>4</sup> of love and romance associated with teenage where teenagers are expected to have love affairs and girl friends and any one without one is an outcast. Leading his life without finding love and dying as a virgin is the greatest fear that Oscar has. Oscar's disappointment over his dying as a virgin proves that love for him is physical just as it is physical for his friends and acquaintances, so he is following the metanarrative that the society follows.

The metanarrative of family and matriarchy is also intact in the novel. Oscar and his sister Lola have to follow the choices and decisions made by their mother Beli who is the head of the family and in the absence of the patriarch the sole bread earner and decision maker for the family. Despite Lola's desire and acts of rebellion she cannot escape the matriarch's authority, she even misses her mother's strictness when she runs away from home and tries to lead her life on her own. It shows that these characters adhere to and believe in the metanarrative of parental authority and the supporting unit of family.

Due to the influence of an ancient family curse that has also doomed the forefathers of Oscar, Oscar and Lola's lives are also affected. Initially Oscar does not believe in the curse. But after undergoing pain, torture and disappointment and experiencing the strange visions that parallel with the life and experiences of his mother he ultimately comes to believe in it, hence, confirming that he does not doubt the metanarrative of family tradition, ancient family curse and superstition.

## **5.2. Breakdown of Boundaries**

### **5.2.1. *The Road***

The distinction between good and bad is kept intact by the father. He guards himself and his child against the people who scavenge the earth which shows that the

notion of right and wrong is kept separate and the mixing of evil and good is disliked. The man does not consider it bad when he acts violently in defense of his son and kills a man to save his son. The man makes sure that he does not kill in order to harm others or to enslave or consume humans. He considers this choice more praiseworthy than the choices of the people who kill and even cannibalize in order to survive. One perceives that in such a difficult world, the distinction between good and evil is rather nuanced; people's actions taken at face value are far from enough to determine whether someone is good or bad. The man's version of the notion of good and bad, right and wrong is sometimes revised and tailored to make his survival possible in the chaotic world but the boundaries between good and bad, right and wrong are always there.

The distinction between man and boy is also preserved as the man as father holds authority and decides everything for the son. The son as a young boy is expected to obey the commands and follow his father's decisions. Despite the fact that on many occasions the son questions the father's acts and decisions especially regarding social conduct, the father does not allow the boy to do as he likes and exercises his authority on the basis of his privileged status as the patriarch.

The man does his best to maintain a distance from the savages who kill and eat people. He believes that his murdering others is justified as long as he does so in self defense and does not eat them. The distinction between survival and savagery is difficult to be maintained in the chaotic world which the man and the boy inhabit. The man considers himself a *good guy* as long as he is not eating humans.

The distinction between life and death is getting blurred. Life in the extreme desolate land has become an experience of death. The artifacts and the natural habitat that once existed on earth have been lost forever. The man finds it difficult to

remember the names of the things that are no more. More importantly the fundamental truths and the customs governing human life have been lost. It is beyond the man's capacity to prevent life as he knows it from collapsing and falling apart. But he does his best to keep himself and especially his son alive. The desire to live and survive has not been lost though life is slipping away slowly.

### **5.2.2. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

Oscar as an immigrant is an outsider in the United States. He is doubly marginalized on the basis of his nationality and race. As a ghetto nerd in New Jersey he is also an outsider on the basis of his class. Oscar's life in New Jersey as an outsider due to his Dominican roots makes him a marginalized individual. He is an outsider even in his native country, since his new status as a Dominican American excludes him from his place of origin. It reveals that the boundaries between local and outsider are observed in the place and time where Oscar lives.

Oscar's status as an outcast for being a nerd shows that those who do not live up to the expectations and established notions of the society are not accepted in its fold. Dominican males are expected to display hypermanliness whereas Oscar does not even show the signs of manly behaviour. Thus he is termed a nerd and also a maricon as he cannot attract girls. His decisions and desperate actions reveal that he realizes that these boundaries exist in the society and in order to assure his survival in it he has to make an effort to shed the status of a nerd.

Oscar is repeatedly reminded and commanded by his friends and family especially his mother to behave like a man. His crying reveals that he is behaving like a girl. The prevalent notion of masculinity in the Dominican society demands that Oscar should not only suppress his weak feminine side but also display machismo—exaggerated manliness and violence. It shows that strict boundaries are enforced and

males and females are required to observe them. Anyone showing deviant behavior is considered to be a misfit or an outcast.

### **5.3. Nostalgia and Optimism**

#### **5.3.1. *The Road***

The man remembers the past and has an ambivalent response to it. Sometimes he feels the past comforts him at other times it seems to him that the remembrance of the fine old days makes the present state appear more terrible. The man's weariness with what reminds him of the past shows his distrust of time and things which in the past were believed to do miracles for people. He used to make up stories to soothe his son but gradually he gives up on making things up because he believes those things were not true. Also telling about what no longer exists makes him regret the loss.

The man tells his wife that they are the *survivors* when she seems to have lost all hope for life. His reassurance to his son that they are carrying the fire and they are the good guys reveals that he retains hope and faith if not in the people and the world at least in himself and his son. The father's belief that his son is carrying the fire and light of goodness and civilization reveals his optimism. He is hopeful that his son will find for himself a better place and will escape the dangers and brutality of the world.

#### **5.3.2. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

His preoccupation with reading comic books and science fiction allows him to escape from the world where he finds himself to be a misfit. He imagines himself to be a popular and powerful hero like the ones he reads about in books. Which reveals that he believes in the romanticism of literature and stories that show optimism and hope which human life hinges upon. Oscar is not old enough to be nostalgic or he does not really have a good past to re-live so his genre writing and fantasies are substitutes for nostalgia.

Oscar is optimistic in his view of love. He feels that his passion and persistence can make him achieve his love. His optimism is evident from his belief that on the other side of life he will not be a nerd but will be a hero instead. Therefore, in the face of extreme chaos and pressure Oscar upholds hope and optimism.

The study attempted to find out whether the characters have a Postmodern world view or they carry what may be termed post-postmodern ideas. For that I had to short-list some dominant traits of postmodernism which people believe in, such as their views on metanarratives and observance of boundaries. I also attempted to find out whether they consider the world and their existence as chaotic, and whether they are nostalgic about the past or carry optimism.

#### **5.4. Recommendations**

For the study of characters' views on postmodern notions only two novels were taken. It is however, recommended for those aspiring to work in this area that in order to comment on the nature of characters in the contemporary fiction with certainty, the number of works under study be increased to three or four so that it can be judged whether the trends and ideas are followed by the majority of the writers, which will aid in determining the trends in novels to come. The notions of postmodernism which the study attempted to analyse with reference to characters could be increased if anyone attempts to analyze these in a single novel which will help in getting to know more about the characters world views. It is also recommended for the prospective researchers to look into any one of the three notions under study in detail in three or more novels. The novels that the researcher took for the analysis of the characters' world views were written by the American authors. However in order to have an insight into the views of characters and their beliefs the novels by Pakistani writers or writers of any region should also be taken for research

so that it can be explored what perspective the characters in the regions other than American hold and are they also moving beyond postmodernism.

### **5.5. Conclusion**

The conclusions which are drawn from the analysis reveal that the characters in both the novels subscribe to the metanarratives of religion, good and bad, love, patriarchy/matriarchy, social conduct, storytelling, machismo, romanticism, and family curse. The divisions and boundaries between right and wrong, man and boy, life and death, survival and savagery, male and female, local and outsider, regular and nerd are also preserved. There is not much evidence of breakdown or blurring of boundaries or distinctions in the characters' world. The characters do not appear to rejoice in the chaos in the world neither are they hopeless. They exhibit optimism even in the face of chaos. However they are not nostalgic or rely on the memory of the past to derive comfort in the present.

The full significance of the concepts under study can only be understood if the ideas of the characters are contextualized within the broader political, economic, and intellectual discourses of the period in which these characters have been placed. Drawing on the ideas of postmodern theory shows how McCarthy and Diaz's characters resist many of the postmodern assumptions about human existence that have come to shape our understanding of human life in recent times. The study and its findings support the notions of the theorists who assert that postmodernism cannot account for the condition of human life in the present age especially due to the wake of recent events i.e. the attack on the world trade centre, because these events changed our perception of the world and us. The postmodernist perspective on the study of character and generally human beings in the present age cannot be generalized nor

can we stick to the notion that the contemporary novels present a postmodernist perspective.

This study cannot of course be exhaustive. Neither postmodernism nor the post-postmodernism is a static literary movement, construct or style. Both contain numerous irreconcilable contradictions, and both will continue to change; readers may rightly challenge some of my implicit assumptions and explicit categories. It also represents an attempt to outline a certain theory of post-postmodern fiction which would perhaps require more research. Thus, I believe this study represents a significant contribution not only to an understanding of characters' views, but also to post-postmodern literature as represented by McCarthy and Diaz. I have defined post-postmodernism and looked at the characters and their views in ways that I hope will indicate their wide-ranging possibilities and help readers rethink their ways of looking at characters that appear in novels that are written after the millennium.



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