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The Grim Reality of Western Violence in *Blood Meridian* or *The Evening Redness in the West*

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Abstract:

Historical fiction mostly relates the significant episodes of past, set in the place where such occurrences have actually taken place. The western narrative in its traditional terms, embodies the hero bringing the bad guy to the justice and liberating the land of his nastiness. The historical narratives of the West also portray the historical characters of the past and their heroic feats. Fredrick Jack Turner has analysed Western landscape of America as full of possibilities and the history of the west as heroic. His analysis has been criticised by the later critics who pay attention to the damage done by the wars fought in the American West. *Blood Meridian* can also be included in this category as the novel turns away from the traditional delineation of the west and focuses on the atrocities caused by the war. Considerably, the novel makes use of a number of historical events and the characters, and through such accounts it unmask the realities that are often concealed. McCarthy uses the minor historical events to weave the major incidents of his novel. The paper therefore deals with this intermingling of history and fiction by McCarthy and the discrepancy from the traditional western narrative.

Keywords: Violence, West, History, Distortion, Facts.

Historical narrative reveals the chief events that have taken place in the past through the characters that often have an enormous historical significance. The spirit, manners and societal conditions of a particular place in the past are also imbibed. The events are unveiled in the form of a story, with necessary fictionalisations to give it a dramatic touch. Such works can either be entirely based on historical aspects, or there is a mixture of history and fiction. The fictionalised characters are also employed to delineate with the historical facts of a certain period. Such works often reconstruct past, the basic details of the time however, require to be authentic. The pattern of analysing such incidents may be different as Fredrick Jackson Turner asserts, "Each age tries to form its own conception of the past. Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time" (4). The novel *Blood Meridian* authored by the prominent American writer Cormac McCarthy, is a ground-breaking narrative about the aftermaths of Mexico-American war. The gothic elements which constitute an important aspect of McCarthy's fiction, embodied especially in his *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, have been introduced here too though with a difference. In this novel, McCarthy has combined the historical incidents within a grotesque setting making it a complex read. The South-western landscape where the novel has been set

as well as the grisly depictions of violent occurrences provides a grotesque feel throughout. The novel is said to have its sources in the memoir of Samuel Chamberlain entitled *My Confession*. Various characters and incidents of the novel have a historical significance, particularly dealing with devastation caused during the war between Mexico and America. Glanton Gang with its prominent member, Judge Holden is the prime figure who is inducing deterioration in the area, creating a gruesome spectacle throughout the narrative. McCarthy has imbibed the theme of violence into historical event to lay bare the brutal western ambience. The atmospheric setting as well as the brutal incidents represented in the novel creates a gruesome feel.

The novel is set on the borderlands of U.S.-Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. The story begins with McCarthy's omniscient narrative, typical of his southern gothic works. The protagonist of the novel is a young nameless man referred to as Kid who has run away from his home at the age of fourteen. In 1849 he arrives at Fredonia, a region in present day Texas which had been annexed by the U.S. Government in 1845. So, the region had become the "hotbed of competing interests among the Mexican government, Native Americans, the U.S. government, and Texas republicans" (Greenwood 50); thereby, inducing ceaseless violence in the area. The Kid joins the army of a U.S. Army Captain, Captain White, who is waging war against the Mexico so that "Americans [...] get to California without having to pass through[...] benighted sister republic and [the] citizens will be protected at last from the notorious packs of cutthroats presently infesting the routes which they are obliged to travel" (30). The expedition fails with a handful of survivors along with Kid arrested and sent to the prison. Thereafter, Kid joins the notorious Glanton Gang that is paid by the Mexican government of west Chihuahua to bring the scalps of Indians. Henceforth, the brutalities of the gang are illustrated, concluding the novel with the fatal encounter of Kid at the hands of Judge Holden, a member of the gang.

The narrative describes the beginning years of the 'Treaty of Guadalupe' that ended the war between Mexico and America. The U.S-Mexico war has induced one of the greatest land annexations in the history of the United States. The war facilitated by the then U.S. President James K. Polk, who along with his administration, sent his troops to southwards to extent the border of Texas into the Mexican Territory and also to facilitate the expansions westward through the newly acquired Rio Grande river (Hamilton 4). The war caused a defeat to Mexico and the treaty went in favour of the United States. The treaty added up 525,000 square miles of land to the United States territory, including the land that makes up all or parts of present-day Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming. Mexico also gave up its entire claim over the Texas, recognising the Rio Grande as the Southern boundary of the U.S. Some critics maintain that *Blood Meridian* mocks as well as distorts the historical findings of Fredrick Turner signified in his essay "The Significance of Frontier in American history" (Karlsson).

Death, destruction and violence have been an important aspect of the western narrative and a number of western works celebrate these aspects. McCarthy himself is infatuated with such themes as he says, "There is no such thing as life without bloodshed"

(Woodward). Unlike the traditional western narrations where the virtuous eliminate the vicious from the society, McCarthy's representations are quite contrary. The reckless violence as emancipated in the novel is not a form of vengeance incurred upon the guilty, but a purposeless suffering of the innocents. There is an extensive slaughter of humanity in the form of the atrocities incurred by the notorious Glanton Gang and the other nefarious groups that have arisen. The gang, which arose initially in the novel as a liberator of the people of Mexico from the ferocious Apache, eventually became avaricious and ruthlessly exploited the population. McCarthy deviates from the traditional genre of the depiction of violence in the western landscape, making death more a disgrace than a source of redemption. As Dan Moss in, "Lacking the article itself: Representation and History in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" asserts:

Death in *Blood Meridian*, however, is different. McCarthy depicts death as neither honourable nor narratively tragic. In doing so, McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* breaks the boundaries of the Western as a genre. But he does not challenge these limits by merely flipping Western conventions on their head; *Blood Meridian* is not an anti-Western critical or self-reflective of the genre. Death in McCarthy's West is not accepted as part of some collective job, as it is shouldered by McMurtry's cowboys, but, rather, death becomes merely fate, more often than not, bathed in gore.

Moss further maintains that for McCarthy the frontier violence is merely carnage, without any civilising or rejuvenating motif. The bloodletting of McCarthy's characters becomes the cause of their own destruction. Whatever may be the techniques of narration applied by McCarthy, various incidents of the novel have a relation with the historical occurrences of that period. As John Emil Sepich in his article "'What kind of Indians was them?': Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" states, "The dust jacket of the novel's hardcover edition states flatly that John Joel Glanton, Judge Holden and 'a number of their followers[...] actually existed, and various accounts of their exploits can be found in chronicles of the period". Cormac McCarthy has fictionalised a number of incidents of the novel but the historical significance of the novel still remains there beyond any doubt. Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession* provides several accounts about the Glanton gang and its members, including Judge Holden. McCarthy makes use of the sources provided by Chamberlain's memoir but he "enhances these details to the limits of their believability, transforming the Judge from an eclectic historical anomaly into a supernatural force within the novel. He possesses vast, encyclopedic knowledge and is depicted as both physically commanding and 'huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant' (McCarthy, 348)" (Hamilton 6). Certainly, *Blood Meridian* is not completely historical as McCarthy fictionalises a number of incidents and characters. The novel is not limited to a few historical characters; instead, "McCarthy weaves fiction and history: he builds certain major fictional events in the narrative out of pieces of minor historical artifacts and strings certain major historical events together with his fiction" (Moos).

Blood Meridian dealing with the concluding phase of the war between America and Mexico portrays the fierce aftermath of the said war. Glanton Gang is a part of the outcome of the war after which many mercenaries were hired by the Mexican government to kill the Native Americans. As portrayed in the novel, there is rampant violence spread by this gang as they slay nearly anybody including the Mexican peasants just to raise money through the large number of scalps. They did not care about the nationality of their victims and killed recklessly when the natives were hard to be found. Chamberlain's authenticates the historical accuracy of the Glanton gang also portrays Glanton as a ferocious man capable of intense violence. As per the historical records, on June 1849, Glanton accepted a contract from the governors of Chihuahua to scalp the Apache Indians and Comanche who have been intruding the area (Sepich *Notes*). In the novel as well, To advine tells kid about the contract of Glanton, "He's got a contract with Trias. They're to pay him a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gómez's head" (66). The Chihuahua government paid well thereby attracting the hunters more towards the scalping profession. As Sepich accounts, "A group of fifty Indian hunters paid two hundred dollars a scalp would have to bring only four scalps a month into Chihuahua City in order to exceed the army's rate of pay, and for work not much more hazardous than the army's" (7). The gang has also been introduced by George MacDonald Fraser in his novel *Flashman and the Redskins* but here unlike *The Blood Meridian*, the gang is represented in a comical manner. Commenting upon the historical significance of the novel and its relation with the actual events, Eric Hage states:

During this time (1840s and '50s), these northern Mexican regions were in pitched conflict with the Apache and Comanche and employed bands of mercenaries to eliminate the natives. These mercenaries, typically from the United States, used scalps as receipt for what was at the time significant payment. [...] Notorious bounty scalp hunters of the period included the Northern Ireland-born James Kirker and infamous James Johnson, who is credited with sparking the scalp industry boom. (31)

Narratives about the west have been significant since the earlier times. Violence has played an essential role in the western narratives, whether it is old or new west movement. The popularity of 'dime novels' as Slotkin has analysed in his book *Gunfighter Nation*, plays a significant role regarding the inclusion of adventurous themes in the fiction, which later included the real events to instigate the effect. These narratives in a way created the archetypes for the portrayal of characters in the western narratives. Fredrick Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier" plays a considerable role regarding the depiction of the western frontier as it has become a grand narrative for the scholars and historians throughout the 20th century. Turner represented west as free land, and the continuous expansion of America in the form of its westward settlement. Turner's analysis ignored the Indians who have an important role to play as one of the westward moving tribes. Turner connected the American development with its westward expansion, making it remarkable for American progress. Turner has been criticised for ignoring class, gender, caste as well as the victims of the expansion. So the old-west that has been influenced by Turner's interpretations, was followed by the new-west (Boissevian). Barcey Owens proclaims in his essay "*Blood*

Meridian and the Reassessment of Violence” that the new west movement has been influenced by the televised representation of violence in American West and it lead to the deconstruction of the Western myth in the nation. Prominent supporters of this movement are Patrica Nelson Limerick, Michael Allen, Richard Slotkin, and Richard White. Owens further proclaims that T.R. Fehrenbach’s book *Comanches: The Destruction of a People* is one of the major sources of McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*. Fehrenbach’s representation of brutalities in history inscribed in the following passage is worth mentioning here:

History is brutal; only future peril lies in omitting or obscuring man’s continuing brutalities. Generations that have been sheltered from the brutalities of the past are poorly equipped to cope with those of their own times. The story of the People is a brutal story, and its judgments must also be brutal. These judgments may offend those who would have man be a different kind of being, and the world a different sort of place. (Qtd in Owens 34)

It is this brutality of the western expansion that McCarthy adheres to bring forth. The atrocities and the bitter experiences of U.S.-Mexico war as well as its aftermaths are well portrayed by McCarthy’s fiction. The murderous devastations induced by the Glanton gang play a significant role in this regard. While commenting upon the ascendance of the Judge and John Glanton, Willard Greenwood asserts that both of them are historical figures. Greenwood further replicates that the representation of the real characters from the history, plays a significant role in unveiling the reality behind the western expansion. As Greenwood proclaims, “This use of actual characters suggests another primary aim of McCarthy’s: the demythologizing of a benign Westward expansion as part of America’s self-definition” (51). Furthermore, as Greenwood authenticates, McCarthy has outstripped romanticism of war in order to bring forth the realisation that war is always about killing.

Neil Campbell, the author of *The Cultures of the American West*, considers the ‘new west’ movement as an attempt to unveil the brutality of the western expansion and the erasure of the alternative narratives by the hyper real myth of the ‘old West’. Slotkin, however says that there is a need for a productive revision of myth as the new-west movement has only deconstructed the old-west popular culture myth without creating a new one in its place. Josh Boissevain in his article, “Blood Meridian and the creation of historical narrative” has analysed the novel as a productive revision of myth. Boissevain asserts that McCarthy has created a relatively verifiable historical narrative through the use of the elements of dime novel and the old-west patterns. According to Boissevain:

Using primary sources,[McCarthy] allows the readers to see first-hand the violence and chaos of the West. [...], McCarthy blends factual history with fiction and literature with both the characters and events in the book; many of the characters, both central and peripheral, are actual historical individuals, and likewise many of the events are based on true incidents. (7)

Boissevain further rectifies that McCarthy does not reject the assertions of Turner, he just makes these representations visible through the eyes of his characters, who can also be

interpreted as the citizens of that time. So, McCarthy makes use of the myth of old west but with a difference. He “breaks down the past myths of the West and begins writing them anew from a completely different perspective” (Bossevian).

Apart from John Glanton, a number of other outlaws have also been mentioned in Chamberlain’s memoir like Reverend Green Yuma Chiefs and Albert Speyer. Glanton, which has an essential historical significance, gains much attention through one of its important members that is Judge Holden who is also a historical figure, analysed in Chamberlain’s *My Confession*. Chamberlain writes about Holden, “I hated him at first sight, and he knew it, yet nothing could be more gentle and kind than his deportment towards me; he would often seek conversation with me” (Qtd. in Sepich *Notes* 16). The Judge, being the most philosophic, literary and analytical minded character in the novel, is also a worshiper of violence. Holden, who plays a significant role in the novel, is introduced rather too late in *My Confession*. While majority of the novel imbibes the episodes of Holden’s destructiveness and his philosophic lectures, Chamberlain devotes only the last twenty-five pages of his book to him. It is this brief analysis that McCarthy expands at length in his novel while portraying the character of Judge Holden. In the introductory scene of the judge where he blames Reverend Green of certain heinous crimes, Holden is himself guilty of one of such crimes in Chamberlain’s account. For example, there is an indication of Holden having raped and murdered a ten years old girl in *Confession*. In the novel, Judge is described as an “enormous man”, “seven feet in height” and “bald as a stone” (8); Chamberlain also describes Judge Holden as a man of gigantic size who is “six foot six” and “had a large fleshy frame, a dull tallow colored face destitute of hair and all expression” (Muse 11). Just as McCarthy has portrayed Holden as the most Philosophic and educated personality, Chamberlain also has made the same analysis of him as is clear from the following passage, “Holden was by far the best educated man in northern Mexico; he conversed with all in their own language, spoke in several Indian lingos, at a fandango would take the Harp or Guitar from the hands of the musicians and charm all with his wonderful performance, and out-waltz any poblana of the ball” (Qtd. in Sepich *Notes* 16). Holden’s malice towards Chamberlain is also related by Sepich with the contemptuous relationship between Judge and Kid, leading to the murder of kid at the hands of Judge.

Patrick W. Shaw, in *The Modern American Novel of Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1800* analyses the deteriorations caused by the said war and proclaims that as per the reports from the siege of Vera Cruz, “Mexicans variously estimate their loss at 500 to 1000 killed and wounded, but all agree that the loss among the soldiery is comparatively small and the destruction among the women and children is very great” (210).

Blood Meridian is often interpreted as moving away from the traditional interpretation of the west. The classic western widely considered a region whose “Edenic landscape promises opportunities” has played an important role in the narratives of the old west (Muse 8). Such narratives are mostly influenced by Fredrick Turners representation of the same in his seminal essay “Significance of Frontier in American History” in which Turner has considered west as a source of American advancement. He considers frontier as the “meeting point

between savagery and civilization”, glorifying the “existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward” (2). Turner’s delineation of West renders it an acute grandness as Christopher Muse asserts, “Turner’s frontier thesis established a creation myth for America—an origin story that exaggerated the emergence of a democratic nation. His vision of the frontier was forged by the tenets of Western expansion and frontier values, which stated that the ‘true point of view in the history of this great nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West’ (3)” (12-13). Turner also emphasises the importance of American expansion, ignoring the damage caused through the use of violence thereof. Commenting on this expansion motive of America, Turner enunciates:

Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. (15)

So, Turner’s thesis discounts the harsh realities of the West for the sake of representing frontier as a land enriched with the possibilities of great accomplishments. “Turner’s essay avidly promotes westward expansion and furthers the dominant stereotype of the frontier, which considers the genocide of the Indians to be acceptable in the progression of Anglo-American civilization” (Muse). McCarthy has analysed the impact of the historical atrocities on the people of that period and it renders more awareness towards the realities of that period. McCarthy, thus diverges from the common narratives of the west that exalts the status of west to the level of perfection. Through the rampant suffering of his characters, he lays bare the suffering of the people as well as the unveils the reality behind the assumed perfection of the frontier. While comparing *Blood Meridian* with the other western novels Don Moss argues that the novel has uncovered the repressed history of the “manifest destiny of the nineteenth century America”. Moss makes the following proclamation in this regard:

Blood Meridian, then, problematizes both literature as historical documentation and history as literary text. By threading together various and disparate accounts of filibusters and scalp hunters, McCarthy crosses the lines that delineate these two often ideologically opposing arenas of fiction and history. McCarthy creates a world where fictional and historical characters (and events) share the stage without any apparent centralizing or determined logic.

So, the novel *Blood Meridian* takes an important historical issue that is, the war between American and Mexico that has caused a huge devastation of human life in the history of the world. The western fiction that began with the dime novels, proceeding with the adventurous tales of the chivalrous folk, gained momentum with the publication of the works dealing with

the historical occurrences of the west. As such narratives lacked the lamination of the gruesome incidents of the west; several writers proceeded with the inclusion of such atrocities in their works. Sam Peckinpah's *Wild Bunch* (movie), Larry McMurthy's novel *Lonesome Dove* can be included in this category. McCarthy is one of those writers who have moved ahead of the adventurous stories of the westerners and proceeded with the depiction of the dark realities of the west. Chamberlain's *My Confession* that is considered to be main source of his novel no doubt authenticates the history behind his story; but it is not the traditional narration of the historical west. Instead, the novel focuses on the brutalities inflicted upon the natives through the expansion drive of America and "McCarthy uncovers the butchery of those rationalized imperialisms" (Moss). Thus McCarthy has dealt with the forgotten aspect of American history that has been unaccounted in favour of the romantic stories of adventurous cowboys passing through the frontier, inhabited by the uncivilised folk. McCarthy lays bare the atrocities afflicted by the westward expansion of America.

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