



Engaging with Cultural Rootlessness in Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*

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ABSTRACT

Identity in each culture is a significant topic depicting its different connotations embedded within different nations and cultures. It comprises of different sets of behavioural patterns, notions and emotional orientations of individuals existing as members and reflecting their socio-psychological contours. It is underscored by features governing sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, race, physical aspects, experiences of childhood, culture etc. An individual gradually becomes familiar with one's identity during early childhood when one's varied experiences have a lasting impact on his/her psyche, eventually establishing his/her identity. The crisis of identity is the inability or insufficiency to establish identity during that age. It is not a consequence of turbulence or confrontation in ethnicity or religion. It also includes divergent factors ranging from inner turmoil, quest for identity, East-West acrimony, generation gap etc. The aspects of identity in the American culture are emanated by different authors in their works unraveling their psychological and cultural expedition. McCarthy is among those American doyens who have underscored the significance of identity and his novel *All the Pretty Horses* investigates the layers of identity by contextualising the cultural and psychological background of the declining American tradition. The paper attempts to explore the dimensions in the writings of McCarthy and his novel being one of his masterpieces.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Trauma, Cormac McCarthy, Criticism, American fiction.

Definition:

'Identity' as a term has been abundantly explored in diverse areas such as psychology, cultural studies, literary theory, sociology etc. Therefore, it is very arduous to categorise and construe this term from any particular perspective and standpoint. Understanding identity requires discerning range of definitions that insinuate its disparate proclivities. The individuals are influenced by the psychosocial growth and at the same time, their historical origins also impact their psyche especially during earlier psychosocial stages. Identity, in any broader sense underlines, "a person's sense of continuity with the past that constitutes the foundation for a meaningful personal and social present, which in turn proposes directions for future" (Deaux, 222).

Erik Erikson asserts that the identity crisis in the adolescents emerges out of the conviction that they are no more children. With this new realization, they are baffled about their speculations about the present and the future. A sequence of anxiety and bewilderment follows as a result of their choices as their inclinations keep vacillating. The idea of the crisis of identity does not portend some catastrophe or turbulence entering into individual's life rather it is a "critical turning point in the life history of an individual, in which development can only move forward by taking a new directional course," (Hopkins, 234). It evinces search for identity and those constantly seeking meaning out of their lives reflect enthusiasm in attaining confidence and certainty. Those who are ignorant of their identity or does not seek answers fail to achieve stability and are more vulnerable to identity crisis.

Introduction:

Cormac McCarthy in his *All the Pretty Horses*, has deftly depicted a picture of a protagonist who happens to be a cowboy. He confronts adversities and ordeals as he ventures through wilderness and landscape. The protagonist namely John Grady Cole evinces unique cowboy tradition of the West and the novel pictures the frontier's modernization. John, the protagonist is aware of the changes engulfing the country and that something is 'happening to country' (Inness, 6). The novel features his life and the way he is disinherited from his ancestral ranching profession and his subsequent pursuit of his dream in Mexico. He idolises old conventions and refuses to relinquish his habits and consequently asserts his self-identity by adhering to the ethics of his society. The novel makes ostensible the wilderness of the American

Southwest and Northern Mexico which has become vulnerable to annihilation owing to the ravaging modern technological and militaristic activities. The pastoral landscape has been ransacked beyond redemption which John can sense after his grandfather's demise.

The novel commences on September 13, 1949 as John buries his grandfather in Texas and the latter's demise indicates the forfeiture of family estate. His grandfather's passing hands them their possession of land as they continue to suffer from impecuniosity and desperate for money, his mother later sells the land to an oil company. Distressed, he goes onto an expedition on horseback to Mexico to realise his dream of becoming a trainer of wild horses. With his friend Rawlins, he affronts the adversities of life there. His expedition makes conspicuous the vanishing of the old conventions such as cowboy culture as a result of feverish urbanization and development which Grady deplors endeavours to desist. Excited by opportunities and promises of his journey, he heads to the south of Mexico anticipating to retain the old cowboy lifestyle. He is also not blind to the fact that the changing world has drastically reduced any hopes of the revival of the cowboy culture and has endangered the older values. McCarthy underlines John Grady's speculations about the frontier which persisted physically, but by 1951, the frontier vanished and eventually the cowboy culture disappeared with its frontier. It suffered from the pressures of urbanization and industrialisation and the pastoral land no longer remained there. With the extinction of pastoral land, the cowboys suffered an identity crisis and John Grady also becomes its victim (Rodriguez, 3).

The disenchantment of John Grady becomes ostensible as he fails to create meaning out of his dissipating life. In his analysis, Philip Snyder examines his development as a cowboy and the way he fails to pursue his vocation and confronts displacement. He fails to follow the conventions of cowboy culture, therefore, feels baffled and crisis-ridden. Snyder is able to highlight the psychological contention of the identity of cowboy. He equally perceives the trail of development in the central character's inability to adapt to the 'cowboy identity' to "a new western environment" (198). McCarthy unveils the way the individuals tend to create meaning out of their lives with their commitments and explorations. Individuals reorient their past experiences with the changing perspectives and simultaneously adjust to their new environment and widening their knowledge.

Development:

The opening lines of the novel feature and underscore the identity crisis of John Grady as he enters house where he sees his grandfather's corpse. Further, he witnesses his own reflection in the dead portraits of his dead ancestors adjusted on the wall. He realizes a connection with the past, with his dead ancestors and attempts to create his own identity seeking inspiration from their cowboy vocation. The paragraph sets the story, "The candleflame and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door" (*Horses*, 1). In his observation of the cowboy culture and its golden era in the American West, David Dary avers that the culture crumbled in the mid-twentieth century. This culture according to Dary has been fictionalized in the minds of the Americans and still tends to define their beliefs about the culture. After the cowboys face dereliction, they need to adjust suitably to affirm and live in the new ambience or perish altogether (199). John Grady shows fortitude in dealing with his misfortune that hampers his future prospects. As he thinks about his ancestors and their valour and courage, he seeks comfort in such memories and the terrifying and horrible fate of his ancestors who died fearlessly. Such deaths are more esteemed and consoling than his father's death, "His grandfather was the oldest of eight boys and the only one to live past the age of twenty-five. They were drowned, shot, kicked by horses. They perished in fires. They seemed to fear only dying in bed" (*Horses*, 4).

The demise of grandfather and his funeral suggests the extinction of the old values and family name owing to the turmoil in the Old West and the Grady name is "buried with that old man" (*Horses*, 4). The family name is very significant as it gives credibility to John Grady and at the same time becomes a cause of his misery as the name takes roots from his maternal side. He fails to motivate himself and feels dejected owing to the fact that he does not have any mentor. He feels alienated and overburdened by the weight of his family name that is gradually scrambling and becoming utterly perplexing for him (Morrison, 176). McCarthy underscores the grandfather's death as the ultimate end of the American plains as the ranchers begin touting their lands to oil companies. This spearheads a cultural crisis as the history of the young cowboys ends up as a consequence and their tradition is also jeopardised. The entire change in affairs and the calamities brought by wars signals the forthcoming crisis (Scoones, 142). As the cowboy culture faces disaster, John Grady's endeavours to engage with other culture and shifting to Mexico becomes necessity for him. Derrida puts that the identity of a culture is a medium of self-differentiation emphasizing the culture, language, ethics etc. of individuals. Gail Moore Morrison and Dianne C. Luce, insinuate that John Grady's quest to redeem the lost culture of ranching life become susceptible to ineffable force of urbanisation and development. They further elaborate on his search for self-actualisation and Luce goes on further in underlining John Grady's motive of self-development (Snyder, 203). Such speculations appear plausible as Grady ignores all concerns regarding his proximity to the Mexican girl, Alejandra. His pitiable predicament owes to his loss, that is the death of his grandfather and loss of his ranch. Both serve as prominent factors for his transition to a new self-realisation. The life of improbability that awaits him in the uncertain future subsequently becomes a subject for his distress and turmoil. He is unable to cope with the loss and fails to reorient to a self-

conception to properly exist in the present.

The influx of technology has bewildering impact on John Grady as he is apprehensive the way it ravages peace and chastity of the wilderness. Therefore, considering his connection with wilderness/landscape and identity, his encounter with fences, trains etc unsettles him and makes him acrimonious and aggressive. His bitterness amplifies due to his realisation that he can no longer be independent as a cowboy:

Some supplicant to the darkness over them all and he stood there for a long time. As he turned to go he heard the train...
It comes boring out of the east like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance and the long light of the headlamp running through the tangled mesquite brakes and creating out of the night the endless fence-line down the dead straight right of the way and sucking it back again wire and post mile on mile into the darkness. (*Horses*, 1)

The mobilisation of trains through the landscape in the wilderness from East to the West shatters the dreams of cowboys by curtailing their ambitions. They are not used to the aberrant situation signified by fences or trains in the plains. This has a devastating influence on the psychology of the cowboys as they always preferred to venture in the vast expanse of the landscape in the absence of any impediments. The cowboy culture is also exclusively a male affair and in such a system of male influence, his divorced mother, a sole inheritor of the long-line of ranching men prefers more likable civilised life in San Antonio rather dwelling on ranches in the frontier (Hage, 34).

McCarthy also evinces the patterns of the conventional heroic cowboy codes and their adjustments in the modern world. The novel commences as critic Gail Moore Morrison elucidates featuring, "John Grady Cole's expulsion from paradise" (176) as he loses his family ranch that his mother sells upon the demise of her husband. In spite of his undaunted efforts to claim his lost ranch, he fears his alienation which mirrors the alienation of the Indians Comanche when their lands were forcibly seized. His identity crisis is escalated by technological intervention, his grandfather's demise, lost customs, the relinquishing of family's inheritance and his father's terminal illness and eventual death. While travelling on an old path which was once used by Comanche Indian, John Grady has an epiphany:

That lost nation come down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children and women with children at their breasts all pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only... nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across the mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives. (*Horses*, 3)

McCarthy compares the predicament of the cowboys to those of the lost Native nations of the West when they affronted extinction with the coming of the Anglo cowboys. He suggests that it is time for cowboys and their culture to encounter the same fate. Besides, he describes John Grady as "a man come to the end of something". While he is riding on his horse and travelling on the old Comanche Indian road, John Grady senses the Native Indian culture that disappeared long ago and subsequently, the cowboy expedition is confronting annihilation. He inadvertently makes such comparisons making conspicuous the vanishing cultures and their process towards extinction (Hage, 51).

John Grady journeys to meet his mother in San Antonio and hitchhikes with an old man driving a truck. The old man strikes a conversation and when his notices Grady's reticence inquires, "You don't talk much, do you?" John Grady answers, "Not a whole lot." John Grady's personality speaks for cowboy culture in which cowboys are expected to reflect the strong, silent stereotype of the Western hero (Snyder, 223). Later, the funeral of Grady's grandfather insinuates the fading of cowboy culture and he further feels aggravated when his parents deplore his proclivity for cowboy lifestyle. His father's predicament is poignant as he reminisce his morbid outcome in the WWII and his fate as a prisoner. He is unable to do anything or even be of any help to his son. Grady's mother works as a stage actress in San Antonio. Grady's conversation with Mr. Franklin, his family lawyer, who asserts his inefficacy to invoke law due to his young age:

Son, not everybody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dying and going to heaven. She [John's mother] don't want to live out there, that's all. (*Horses*, 13)

The mother of John Grady shows the influence of modernity as she hampers his prospects of living a life of cowboy. John Grady struggles to comprehend her way of life by attending her play which utterly fails, "to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming" (*Horses*, 17). He witnesses the way old customs are being replaced by the new.

John Grady desires to establish an identity, but fails to connect to his roots as he longs to affix his ties with imaginary past rather than dreadful current situation. The chaos in the family also adds to his misery and he becomes cynic about his mother's actions of selling the ranch. He abhors his ties with his family and even considers them insignificant, dead and ineffective. As an amateur, he tries to search for his own destiny by travelling to Mexico anticipating change and better circumstances of his survival. John Grady aspires to live in an ideal pastoral ambience and that impulse leads to his psychological neurosis. But in his last ride with his father, he feels exasperation on his father's face and the ordeal that hints to his own impending acrimony (Guillemain, 95). He observes the way his father shares his trauma who offers him a saddle symbolising his cowboy inheritance. He expresses how change is imminent which his son has to confront sooner or later. McCarthy also

reflects the constant changing patterns of the Old West by accentuating insight of John Grady's father who underlines the new changing contours. The father's apprehensions upsurge as he witnesses the gradual dissipation of the pastoral land and becomes hopeless for the future of the land. McCarthy elaborates Grady's nature by describing him as "The boy who rode slightly before him sat a horse not only as if he'd been born to it."

John Grady also faces the threat of insecurity as his father apprises him about the deterioration and fate of the ranching culture to the Comanche some two hundred years ago. His father also affirms the dissolution of the cowboy culture with the changing time. Therefore, it is not startling that Grady and his father compare their plight with the Comanche Indian. The only hope that they cherish is in the wilderness of the Mexican south. Mexicans and the Indians represent a non-instrumental existence far away from the chaos of the modern world and becomes an image with which they can attach themselves with (Beck, 134). Their sense of crisis also becomes apparent which: McCarthy expresses:

The last thing his father said was that the country would never be the same. People don't feel safe no more. We're like the Comanche was two hundred years ago. We don't know what's going to show up here come daylight. We don't even know what color they'll be. (*Horses*, 20)

Soon John Grady considers leaving San Angelo after encountering crisis about his future and feeling emptiness and like most adolescents; he is controlled by his urge to seek meaning out of his dreary existence. It also indicates his attempt to emancipate himself from the chains of family identity. He is determined to gain experience from his adversities and change into a responsible man with a sense of obligation and responsibility. The blatant changes that escalate his difficulties alter his perception of the world where he sets to seek meaning and identity as a cowboy.

The Journey:

John Grady and Rawlins set out to their journey to Mexico with the hopes of improving their prospects and encounter change everywhere. Their expedition also suggests a promise of new beginning and both are portrayed as "lined out behind one another and making for the alien shore like a party of marauders" (*Horses*, 38). As they are about to enter Mexico, McCarthy underlines the issue of national identity in the borderlands. They happen to meet an American man of Mexican origin who lives on the border of American side and who is labeled Mexican by McCarthy in the novel. He resembles a typical man living on the border (Sugg, 199). Grady's friend Rawlins asks him, "You know that Country Down there? The Mexican shook his head and spat. I have never been to Mexico in my life" (*Horses*, 27). As they enter Mexico, they are startled by aberrance and strangeness of the new world. The border seems to welcome the change as they appear as an ideal place of hybridization, where the cultures seem to have blended which is illustrated by John Grady's ability to alter between disparate languages (Hage, 51). The affinity to the languishing cowboy tradition incarcerates John Grady to rely on the lost cowboy vogue. Therefore, John Grady never finds any opportunity to resolve his identity conflict imposed by the external factors. He aspires to relate to the cowboy tradition in Mexico that further puts him in more turbulence as he confronts more onerous conditions prevailing there. His desire to fulfill his dreams remains obscure in the world witnessing modern technological advancement. James D. Lilley avows that their journey to Mexico confirms, "repeating of the American project itself, looking for a new beginning that reestablished itself with a forgotten past" (as cited in Campbell, 46). Later, John Grady indulges in violence emanating his aggression that reiterates one of the themes of the borderlands. Katherine Sugg hints that McCarthy's protagonists offer opportunities that were hindered during WWII that led to reduction in the open pastures and the cowboys began to adjust within urban culture (118). They also meet another teenager on the road namely Jimmy Blevins who becomes their accomplice and through him the ordeals of the border crossing are unveiled. Rawlins inquires his purpose of riding, to which he replies "Cause I'm American." The significance of national identity becomes conspicuous as they accept his presence by disregarding him as a careless teenager. His ineptitude is revealed as he loses his horse and clothes in violent storm. He also requests their help to find the stolen horse.

The novel embraces the American canon of fiction depicting struggle of young men who endure their difficulties to achieve moral refinement. John Grady's expedition is his struggle to realise his dream of emulating cowboy culture and his relentless struggle to preserve it. He continuously follows ideals that make his life unrealistic and fictional, "He lay a long time listening to the others breathing in their sleep while he contemplated the wildness about him, the wildness within" (*Horses*, 50). Further, they meet a group of Zacateros who are cultivators of hay and fodder. They feel disenchanted by looking at their predicament, "a rough lot, half dressed in rags, they smelled of smoke and tallow . . . and they looked as wild and strange as the country they were in." The novel seems to offer the difference that "one country is not another" (*Horses*, 122). The two dream of reorienting their lives and achieve the forgotten glory of the cowboy culture as they begin working as vaqueros (cowboys) on Don Hector's ranch (*Horses*, 82). They have coffee with local vaqueros, who believe America is "the country to the north was little more than a rumor" (*Horses*, 81).

The Promise:

John Grady proves himself in highlighting his work prowess which is noticed by his coworkers who acknowledge his adroitness in harnessing horses. He illustrates this by taming six horses in four days. He is quite happy with his demeanor of becoming a cowboy which was a lost dream for him. He had made a long tiring journey to achieve his dream and identity and working on the ranch seems amiable to him. As Don Hector inquires about the purpose of his stay at Mexico, his reply is uncertain, "I just wanted to see the country, I reckon" (*Horses*, 96). The life at the ranch pleases him immensely and he even starts an affair with Alejandra, quite oblivious that she has attached herself with the modern world. As their love doomed from the start, their affair ends bitterly. The romantic tryst between John Grady and Alejandra manifests an intricate relationship of opposing tendencies, especially of a nation. Alejandra represents an image of her country Mexico differing in its propensity and identity from Americans. Grady seeks his lost ambition of becoming a cowboy and his dream of living in pastoral life is realised in Mexico. John Grady also becomes familiar with the different cultural norms when Alejandra undermines the social conventions by having a promiscuous affair with him. Her aunt stridently castigates her misdemeanor as she apprises John Grady:

I want you to be considerate of a young girl's reputation . . . You must understand. This is another country. Here a woman's reputation is all she has. . . There is no forgiveness. For woman. A man may lose his honor and regain it again. But a woman cannot. She cannot. (*Horses*, 115).

Alfonsa, the aunt denigrates John Grady and refutes any possibility of his marriage with Alejandra because of different cultural dispositions. The cultural chasm is quite profound and Alejandra's aunt rejects him as he is "from another country" (Canfield, 263). Later their momentary friend, Jimmy Blevins happens to murder a man and a manhunt is launched to arrest him. The police also chase John Grady and Rawlins and Don Hector hands them over to the police as he becomes aware of his daughter's exploitation by John Grady. During John Grady's stay in jail, a period of violence follows.

Experience:

When Alejandra promises to avoid John Grady, Alfonsa arranges Grady's and Rawlins' release from prison. This pain also hits him hard as he fails to convince Alejandra to marry him:

He saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all. He felt something cold and soulless enter like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly and he had no reason to believe it would ever leave. . . What he had not known was that it was mindless and so had no way to know the limits of those souls and what he feared was that there might be no limits. (*Horses*, 214)

John Grady overlooks human connection owing to his identity crisis and tries to comprehend his malfeasances. He is uncertain about his future prospects and about where his life is taking him to, "He slept that night in a field far from any town. He built no fire . . . and he listened to the wind in the emptiness" (*Horses*, 214). His separation from society is evident that prolongs his aggravation. He has failed in all personal ventures and even his girlfriend abandons him for good. His aggression becomes apparent when he avenges the death of his friend Blevins, and eventually ostracizing his desire of becoming a cowboy. He also rescues his horses and takes his enemy, the captain as his hostage. His attitude towards his life continues to change thereafter:

He remembered Alejandra and the sadness he'd first seen in the slope of her shoulders which he presumed to understand and of which he knew nothing and he felt a loneliness he'd not known since he was a child and felt wholly alien to the world although he loved it still. He thought that the world's heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world's pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of divergent equity. (*Horses*, 235)

John Grady encounters another loss in the image of his father, "when he woke he realized that he knew his father was dead" and suffers through "a loneliness he'd not known since he was a child and he felt wholly alien to the world although he loved it still," (*Horses*, 235). His restlessness is also emphasised and how he becomes vulnerable to loneliness and fulfillment. His conversation with Rawlins highlights the impact of the entire trip:

John Grady: I think I'm going to move on. Rawlins:

This is still good country.

John Grady: Yeah. I know it is. But it aint my country. Rawlins:

Where is your country?

John Grady: I don't know. I don't know where it is. I don't know what happens to country. (*Horses*, 250)

His psychological tumult is due to the changing world around him is also reiterated:

Perhaps as if to slow the world that was rushing away and seemed to care nothing for the old or young or rich or poor or

dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead. (*Horses* 251)

McCarthy also evinces the violence that ensconced the development of America as a nation. He reinforces the way the race of the Native Americans was decimated and even goes onto mention the destruction that escalated before. It shows how the Cowboy culture is facing decline and reverberates the visuals of Comanche trail ride evoking the horrible history of the past. McCarthy asserts:

The Indian stood watching him. He could see that none of them spoke among themselves or commented on his riding there nor did they raise a hand in greeting or call out to him. They had no curiosity about him at all. As if they knew all they needed to know. They stood and watched him pass and watched him vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish. (*Horses*, 251)

McCarthy also reveals the images of lost pastoral culture and evokes nostalgia of the past in the following words:

In the evening a wind came up and reddened all the sky before him. There were few cattle in that country because it was barren country indeed yet he came at the evening upon a solitary bull rolling in the dust against the bloodred sunset like an animal in sacrificial torment. The bloodred dust blew down out of the sun. (*Horses*, 252).

John Grady's disenchantment with his dreams of regaining the lost cowboy culture with the dawn of modernisation and technological advancement pains him extremely:

With the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land. . . horse and rider and horse passes on their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come. (*Horses*, 252)

The passage avers the symbolic portrayal of a cowboy who ventures through wilderness before merging into the darkness. John Grady's mental deterioration symbolizes the decline of the cowboy culture with the arrival of modernity that annihilated the older cultures. Throughout the story, his hunger to reclaim the lost cowboy tradition remains an inscrutable force.

Conclusion:

John Grady terribly fails to search for a stable self in the face of continuous modernisation and technological advancement. He seeks to construct his identity by enduring psychosocial crisis. He confronts unprecedented situations and endures the violence and suffers personal loss that changes his perspective of the world. He is an adolescent who gradually develops a sense of self in the ranching landscape that is on the verge of decline. The novel's trajectory elaborates the meaning of identity crisis as underlined by McCarthy's model. He also becomes aware of the cause of his misery and wretched condition and its repercussions on him, yet he fails to reorient his life. His identity suggests his consciousness of cowboy culture and his undeterred passion for magnificence, solitude and liberty that are embraced by cowboy culture. John Grady's obsession to embrace cowboy culture, his search for the past and ardent desire for the cowboy culture manifests his psychological and cultural turmoil in himself.

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