



JOHN STEINBECK'S FICTIONAL FORTE IN DEPICTING THE IMAGE OF MAN AND ENDOWING HIS CHARACTERS WITH A FORWARD LOOKING QUALITY IN HIS NOVELS: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper analyses John Steinbeck's fictional forte as his novels earned uniqueness in well-defining the image of man. This paper goes through a few of Steinbeck's characters who dream for their basic needs stick as food and shelter and also reveals their bestial side to strive in a society. Thus this paper comes out with a print that almost all the characters of Steinbeck are endowed with a forward looking quality.

Key Words: *Man, American-Dream, Bestial Quality, Society, Personality, Humanitarian Love.*

The uniqueness of John Steinbeck's novels is its well-defined image of man. His pre-occupation with life and living does obviously unfold the image of man lending itself for a comprehensive perspective attesting to the fact that man is a complex creature with different drives and notions. For overcoming his inadequacies, he incessantly thrives with hope. Steinbeck's man, taken as a product of dreams and instincts, has a similar identity en masse. Though his image of man has a universal appeal, it is "the obvious product of despairing self-hatred, extended from the individual self to the whole race of man, with its accompanying will to degradation and humiliation" (Fuller 7). This 'accompanying will' present in man makes Steinbeck declare openly that the danger, the glory and choice rest finally in man. This becomes evident from his saying stated thus:

"Man himself has become our greatest hazard
and our only hope, so that today St. John
the apostle may well be paraphrased. In the end
is the word and word is man and the word
is with Men" (P 22).

Most of Steinbeck's fiction represents the American dream – for betterment – and this dream is prevalent with successive phases. In the words of Frederic Carpender, "First the dream of Conquest, then of escape, then the settlement and ownership" (P 68). Burton Rascoe comments:

"Steinbeck has compassion without mandlinity,
Sentiment without sentimentally, a stern,
Realistic, very observant and deductive
Sense about the realistic and about the
Consequences in a chain of cause" (346).

Steinbeck depicts his man as a social organism who imbibed with certain institutional qualities. These institutional qualities present in his man make one feel the animalizing tendency of his man, for Steinbeck himself found it valid to study him first as an animal. Man in his success or failure exposes his animal nature. As Edmund Magny-Claude has put it,

"Steinbeck has an extraordinary power to
catch and paint man in his most elementary
terms... those that bring him closer to
other men or even to other beings" (P 148).



The animals, presented with a symbolic significance in Steinbeck's novels, help one to find out the underlying drives and urges present in man. The primordial nature of Lennie, represented in *Of Mice and Men* gives his man a bestial quality. Regarding intellect, he lacks the will for social motivation. In *In Dubious Battle*, the whole group, when they resort to violence, become a group animal and are subjected to bloodshed, starvation and death. "The best ambition a man could cherish, both for himself and for his fellows, is that he and they alike may, each in himself and each in his own way, ... find the fellowship of a common life and a common good" (Seth 245). This seeking of the common good by malformed leaders makes the strikers purely animals. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the presentation of animals with their symbolical significance directly or indirectly presents the instinctual nature of man. Steinbeck's assertion of a man's achievement in a group paves the way for his non-teleological thinking which "concerns itself primarily not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather what actually is – attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions what or how, instead of why" (P 135). His biological analogy assisted him in formulating his idea about group with an objective reality. This realism paves the way to apprehend the inherent conflicts which often drive a man to brink of a tragedy and social dynamism. The group man concept is highlighted in a subtle manner in *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. In these novels, Steinbeck's men form a group to achieve their ends and "this group idea is American, not Russian and stems from Walt Whitman, not Karl Marx" (Carpenter 246). The group theory evolves in *Of Mice and Men*, with the leadership of George over Lennie and Curley over others, except Slim, which thereby suggests for two groups – George, Lennie, Candy and Crooks and Curley, Curley's wife and his father. With this group, especially under the leadership of George, Steinbeck makes the American dream prevail thereby giving us the idea about egocentric nature present in it. Later in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the group concept is merged with Emerson's 'oversoul' concept to the big soul by Jim Casy and merges with Walt Whitman's "religion of Love of all man and his mass democracy" (P 324). This love to his fellow-feelings makes Tom Joad and Ma Joad evolve as Leaders from the strugglers and the experiences found parallel in their society where "oppression and intimidation only serves to strengthen the social group" (Lisca 172).

The tension between illusion and reality governs the motives and actions of John Steinbeck's characters. The dreamy nature of the characters, who are the products of the American dream, is responsible for their failures. This is due to their lack of adjustments and practical intelligence to overcome the obstacles in society. Hence, they fall a prey to the predatory nature of the society which is in fact, a reality. On the other hand, the society 'comprises of a group of egocentric individuals. It is a collective product of envy, malice, rivalry and dominance that is present in the individual character. The results are dehumanization, violence, disintegration and humiliation of the individual who wishes for betterment. This is the central theme of Steinbeck's fictional world. As Frederic Carpenter puts it,

"Always his fiction has described the
interplay of dream and reality : his thought
has followed the development of the American
dream " (Dreamer 68).

So, by seeing the individuals through their illusionary world, one can derive one aspect of the image of man as portrayed by Steinbeck. The presence of the American dream in the characters takes different forms which either end in disillusionment or in hope. The dream for "a bit of earth to give him sustenance and dignity" (Gardiner 223) is shattered by the lack of pragmatic intelligence in *Of Mice and Men*. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, "The conflict springs from the opposition between the "Golden West" of the Imagination, and actual California of the farmer's association and the migrants (Dreamer 68) though not realised, ends in the hope. In *In Dubious Battle*, the contemporary dream of collective action leading to the building of a new social order is unaccomplished because of the failure of the characters to realize their own strength, the exploitation by the leaders, and the imbalance of power in the endless battle. In *Of Mice and Men*, the two itinerant ranch workers, George and Lennie, dream of owning a piece of land. This dream attracts Candy, the swamper, and he comes forward to provide financial help. Though this dream does not materialize, the only person to be benefited, atleast by the thought of it, is Lennie by



often hearing the recited of the dream from George. Man's instinct always strives to achieve an improved and elevated state and this paradigmatic dream of a vaulting man is found in George's recited to Lennie:

“We're gonna get the jack together and
we're gonna have a little house and
a couple of acres on' a cow and some pigs
and” (Steinbeck 35).

On the contrary, he also portrays ranch workers who have no ambition – dream for betterment of them, Steinbeck says through George:

“Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the
loneliness guys in the world. They get no
family. They don't belong to no place.
They come to a ranch an' work up a state
and they go into town and blow their stake,
and the first thing you know they're pounding
their tail on some other ranch. They ain't
got nothing to look ahead to” (OMM 34).

In presenting the individual characters, 'Man' is shown here as an unreformed brute (Lennie) and the other (George) with an awakening consciousness. Though their dream survives here like a ritual, its advancement for realization is subtle. Though they are calculative in trying to achieve it, they fail because of the weak bond on the individual level to achieve it practically and also due to the indirect influence of society (symbolically represented by Curley's wife) which shatters their dream and concludes as a tragedy. Frederic Carpenter says:

“Security, independence, a piece of land, the
Pioneer's dream and once almost the American
Reality... is 'just in their head'. This is the
American tragedy... It is a tragedy of idea.
These “heroes” achieve significance because
They give expression to the American dream in
Its simplest form” (Dreamer 76-77).

Apart from George and Lennie, the other dreaming men are Candy and Crooks. Through his character, Candy, the Swamper, who overhears the recital of George to Lennie, “Steinbeck emphasizes the natural bond between life and productive property” (Gardiner 223) and at the same time, portrays Candy's incompatibility and the want of dignity in man. His wish is seen when he says to Crooks:

“Every body wants a little bit of land, not much
Just' som', thin' that was his. Som' thin' he
Could live on and there could not nobody
throw him off of it. I never had one
it wasn't none of my harrest” (OMM 90).

But Crooks is presented as a skeptical man who is aware of the futility of such dreams which exist just in their head. His rejection of the dream by withdrawing is a foreshadowing of the overall disillusionment of the novel. Being a negro living in a crippling confinement, he evolves a personality and finds a dignity in himself. When Curley's wife comes to his room, he is irritated and forgets that she is his employer's wife and tries to maintain his dignity – which is eventually his dream. He orders her to get out of the place and when she reminds and warns him of the reality, he says to Candy after his departure “well, jus' forget it.... I wouldn't want to go no place like that”



(OMM 96). Here, he loses his personality and ego and is disillusioned. Though Crooks is skeptical of the dream of Lennie, George, and Candy, he lacks the adjustment that might have presented his individuality of which Steinbeck says:

“Man is a double thing, a group animal and at the same time an individual ... he cannot successfully be the second until he has fulfilled the first” (P 22).

The characters plan and try to execute the dream that is “never – quite – realized, too often tragically shattered dreams of men towards an ideal future of security, tranquility, ease, and contentment runs like a Greek choral chant throughout the novel Infecting, enlivening and ennobling ...” (Rascoe 61). But the element of hope is present even after disillusionment here, with Slim consoling George, and also in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle*. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the representative work of exodus during the depression years, the Joad family dreams of the promised Land – California. They are forced to travel in their jalopies with hope – the basic form for the dream to materialize. In this novel, Jim Casy, ex-revivalist preacher, dreams to help people and considers them:

“I figgered, may be it’s all men an’ all women love; may be that’s the Holy Spirit – the human spirit – the whole she bang” (GW 20).

and further says, “An’ where folks are on the road, I’m goanna be with them” (GW 50). To some extent, he achieves it and finally is killed by the cop. His dream though found to be shattered revives again in Tom Joad who from the dream of betterment of the family and for an ideal Home thinks and acts out of humanitarian love. This transition takes place in Tom’s heart when Jim Casy gets arrested for Tom’s crime of attacking the Sheriff. Jim Casy shares in the experiences of his people, and develops from them and he acts with his people. From him, Tom Joad learns both through words and through deeds. “When Casy dies, Tom gives expression to his dream, and continues to act upon it” (Dreamer 78). He dreams for freedom – to be human. But because of his emotional nature, he becomes a threat to the family security as well as to himself by killing the cop who killed Casy. He hides in a culvert believing that it would save his family and himself from the on-coming danger. But his hide-out is revealed by Ruthie – his child sister. His dream for security is now and the open which later devoid of fear becomes the dream and assertion to help the stricken humanity, the ex-dream of Casy revives again:

“Then I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark.
I’ll be ever’ where – whenever you look” (GW 385).

Peter Lisca in pointing the three skeins of American thought – transcendental oversoul, Emerson’s faith in common man and his protestant self-reliance – strikes a parallel between Tom’s assertion and Whitman’s religion of love” (World 153). The egocentric dream of Tom and the family expands to include humanity as well as along with hope to procure their values.

The individual dreams of the Joads get incorporated to the universal dream of achieving freedom. “Not the freedom of a religion or sect or point of view. Just freedom, the condition in which a man feels like a human being, like himself” (Hughes 51). Thus the ‘I’ dream is merged with the ‘we’ dream on humanitarian grounds as the dictum of Tolstoi:

“Men are mere like than unlike another.
Let us make them know one another
better, that they may be all humbled
and strengthened with a sense of their
fraternity” (Gibbs 103).

But this sense of fraternity is made and brought out as a mere contribution by the leaders in *In Dubious Battle*. To conclude, Steinbeck’s men dream and bridle and buck under failure. These Adams, who may be strong or gullible,



revolutionary or sentimental are subjected to the tragic and inspite of their stoical endurance. Steinbeck in giving a sympathetic ascertain of the American dream with its paradoxes says:

“These dreams describe an vague yearnings
towards what we wish were and hope we may
be: wise, just, compassionate, and noble.
The fact that we have this dream at all is
perhaps an indication of its possibility” (P 7).

and this possibility can be achieved by “Man’s proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit – for gallantry in defeat – for courage, compassion and Love” (P 22). In an attempt to accomplish their dreams, the characters endure instead of bemoaning for their lot. Their conditions become worse and their social struggle becomes “a tragicomedy of animal instincts” (Kazin 395).

In conclusion, it may be stated that Steinbeck’s characters are the individuals who dream for their basic needs such as food and shelter. In order to procure them, they strive in a society, thereby revealing their bestial side. As Emblar points out:

“In Steinbeck’s (search) for a social philosophy
which could meet the problems of his day, he
turned for assistance to the biological sciences.
In these he found sound method, tasted hypothesis,
and it could be translated into language of human
behaviour, a body of usable information about
sub-human life” (P 84).

Then, the focus is on the group and its relational importance in the life of individual. The group as a nucleus of the society receives full attention in *In Dubious Battle, of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Almost all the characters are endowed with a forward looking quality.

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