

**MAN VERSUS LAND IN THE STEINBECK'S NOVEL
EAST OF EDEN AND THE GRAPES OF WRATH**

Dr.R.VITHYA PRABHA

Associate Professor

Department of English

Nehru Arts and Science College

Coimbatore

Tamilnadu

India

Abstract:

John Steinbeck with his spirit of Naturalism, he has portrayed man as an integral part of nature in his novels. This paper gives an analysis of Steinbeck's treatment of the elements of Nature, mainly land and its impact on man in creating certain significant traits in his characters which are found to be manifest in his behavior and response to the environmental stimuli is attempted.

Keywords: Naturalism

John Steinbeck, all through his literary career, has attempted to render his passionate belief in the oneness of life in a dramatic way. His treatment of land is nonetheless remarkable for his acute portrayal of environment and of its effect on man.

The early California fiction of Steinbeck can be said to be firmly ensconced within the tradition of Naturalism. The characters when analyzed in terms of their life, customs, habits and faith can only be called natural and simple. The true source of man, whether viewed from the poetic sense, religious sense or philosophic sense is land, an important element of Nature, the authentic home and the kind nurturer of mankind.

Land is mostly portrayed as an ominous element which is capable of enhancing or wrecking man's destiny. In the novels of John Steinbeck, it is mostly presented as a relentless entity, stalling all the dreams and aspirations of man, only to remind him of its domineering power. At the same time, his image of man is characterized by comprehensiveness, complexity and variety which lead to the major drive and motives in human life. It is rather the humanism of Steinbeck, which has conditioned his image of man set in the background of land and which is deeply entrenched in optimism.

In the early novels of John Steinbeck, the discord between man and land can be perceived and such a perception leads to the notion that man and land are at constant war – paths striving to achieve superiority. But on a closer scrutiny it can be understood that the apparent animosity arises out of the dependence of each on the other. Man needs land's kindness to live peacefully and the land needs a receiver of its bounty. This mutual interdependence leads to a conflicting situation when man depletes the bounties of land by a wrong approach and land assumes the role of a cruel mother chastising man for his ignorance. Here as Timmerman observes "Nature's abundance is prevented to a kind of grotesque life form, manipulated by and in order to satisfy human greed". (318)

In spite of the fact that man has depleted the natural resources he realizes his plight of helplessness when juxtaposed against the cruel Mother Earth and once again succumbs to the pressure she exerts. He is forever bonded to the land and any attempt to break free from this bond proves to be disastrous. When man discovers the nature of the bond he is complacent and attains the state of equanimity, where he can accept beneficial blessing, as well as the cruel reprimand of this element with the same demeanor.

It can also be seen that land plays the role of an elusive truant in most of the novels based at

California. It becomes fallow and displaces man from his nature abode. Then begin man's quest for a home away from home, which normally is never satisfied. The hunt for a homestead lasts forever rendering man back to the primitive stage of a nomad. In the novels **East of Eden** and **The Grapes of Wrath** it can be observed that the characters do not even think of the possibility of taking up a profession other than farming. These two novels are set up in the background of industrialization, at the time when the entire nation of America was subjected to tremendous political and economic upheavals arising out of industrialization and modernization. But the characters in these two novels do not refuse to visualize their life independent of land, nor do they even get an offer to work as laborers in industries. The character of Al in **The Grapes of Wrath** is a seasoned mechanic and he knows everything about automobiles, but he fails to take up this profession. When the dreams of greener pastures shared by the entire family, is shattered, he also works as a picker in the plantations for very low wages. In this novel, man takes the land too much for granted and allows it go fallow after sapping it out and as a result of this and the failure of seasonal rains, the entire region crumbles into a dustbowl. He abandons it when he realizes that it no more of any use to him nor belongs to him. The only characters who feel reluctant to leave for greener pastures are the grandfather and grandmother more out of the compassion and empathy they have towards the land they have tilled and toiled on. These are the two characters that have grown roots in their homestead and find it difficult to accede to the fact that they are tracted out of their lands by the bank. Grandpa Joad is dead to the reality even before they set forth on their long journey. Figuratively he is sedated and carried to the truck for he has ceased to exist beyond the realms of the dried up land. Granma Joad, whose life and thoughts are centered on the land and Grandpa Joad virtually suffers a mental death and everything that goes on around her is simply beyond her comprehension. The death of these two characters on the way is inevitable and is similar to the death of transplanted sapling which is too big for the process.

As the family reaches California, one can see their state of abject poverty juxtaposed against the prosperity of the lush green plantations. They feel poverty stricken and deprived. It is a state when man realizes that land is indeed a great mother who can at times be harsh than protective. This attitude of land elicits varied responses from the members of the Joad family while the men almost accept their fate, it is the women almost accept their fate, it is the women who exhibits their strong will akin to that of the land and almost rise to the level of combating

and questioning her cruelty. Steinbeck's depiction of human courage and dignity in the face of terrible brutality and starvation is unforgettable. The characters of **The Grapes of Wrath** suffer only serves to nurture their power to transformation on reaching California. The reluctant preacher, Casy, transforms into an activist interested in collective good after he takes up the blame for the attack on the authority by Tom in order to safe guard the integrity of the Joad family. When he dies his ideals are adopted by Tom Joad, who leaves the fold of his family and dedicates himself to collective good. He leaves Oklahoma with the Joad family, probably because he is left with no other option. But a strange kind of understanding downs on him after leaving the family, when he is on an exile. The entire pattern with man and land as components emerge out of the wilderness and it he comes to terms with the truth that has eluded him so far. He is one character who has responded in a positive way to the land.

Ma Joad is yet another person who draws her strength from the environment. A sullen housewife in her home in Oklahoma transforms into a matriarch on reaching the valleys of California. The men relent before the ever – pervading fertility of these lands and are actually terrified at its new manifestation. But Ma identifies it with her latent powers and draws strength and morale out of it. She never once complains about the situation but all the while she is making efforts to feed the family and planning then next move. She plays a very vital in keeping the unit intact with the few expectations of the weaklings like Connie and Noah. She is a symbol of the universal Mother and reflects the land in this trait. Rose of Shoran in last scene rises a towering figure and undoubtedly she receives understanding and strength and courage from their mother. The frail selfish girl herself becomes the personification of a life giving force move like the land that provides if it chooses to. Though the final scene depicting an old man at a young girl's breast is totally all against all socio – ethical norms, the scene is totally natural and harmonious and proves Steinbeck's point of that man can survive in nature if he is totally natural. It is noted that the land that assume the role of cherishing mother never shatter and the men and women depicted. They retain a positive outlook till the end and fruit in the Great Mother.

Adam in **East of Eden** after the betrayal by Cathy denounces everything but when he is shaken out of his oblivion, he once again cultivates his land though he incurs a loss. Even after moving out of his ranch, he is not able to sever his bond with his Eden.

In **East of Eden**, the Edenic symbol remains at the background as it is not land that

manipulates the moves of man but is rather the temperamental choice of man that determines his attitude towards land. For many international readers, Steinbeck's work captures the elusive American Psyche bonds to land, the need for a place. Many of Steinbeck's stories are archetypal restless migrants moving west to begin anew, once again in close association with land.

John Steinbeck has welded himself into the life of the Salinas valley and enjoyed spiritual stability by reporting the life cycles of the valley gardeners and mystics and adventures, by studying and steeping himself in its growth processes out of a close and affectionate interest in the biology of human affairs. Steinbeck's absorption in the life of his native valley has given him a sympathetic perspective on the animal native of human life, a means reconciliation of people as people. The depression naturalists saw life as one vast Chicago slaughter house, a guerilla war, a perpetual bombing raid. But Steinbeck has picked up a refreshing belief in human fellowship and courage and has learned to accept the rhythm of life, with man and nature as the two counterparts existing in balance. Obviously in the novels of Steinbeck where land is portrayed as a pivotal force, man is mostly portrayed to be at the receiving end, reacting and responding suitably to the cycle and rhythm, the land assumes.

The novel, **East of Eden** portrays man's quest and rejection of land simultaneously. The protagonist Adam Trask uses his land to express his varied emotions. Land, in this novel, does not elicit any strong reaction from him but on the other hand, whenever he is disturbed by a powerful turn of events, he immediately makes a decision concerning land. His terror for his half brother Charles violence drives him out of his farm. After his return from the army, though he involves himself in the activities of the ranch in Connecticut, it can be seen that the usual fervor of the Steinbeck hero for land and activities concerned with it are conspicuously missing. On marrying Cathy he expresses his sense of contentment by going in search of his Eden in the Salinas valley, California.

Later when Cathy deserts him, Adam goes into a phase of mental hibernation and totally neglects his Eden. His response is not to any condition prevailing over land, but to the other living stimuli, essentially reflecting only upon land when he finds out the real identify and nature of Cathy, he understands the purposelessness of repenting over his lost conjugal bliss. Perhaps this sense of despair and hopelessness results in his last adventure with his ranch, namely, the cultivation of turnips, which results in an unfortunate loss, this helps him to sever

all his lies with his land and to settle down in Salinas Cal earns a fortune by entering into a partnership with the son of Samuel Hamilton and amasses a huge profit and makes it over to Adam. But Adam is not able to accept either the money or the love of Cal. His rejection of both, the land and his son, is perhaps because of his ability to identify traits of Cathy and Charles in Caleb, combined with his jealousy on the land that failed him in yielding to Cal. Adam's decision to shift his family to the town of Salinas is perhaps a gesture of totally removing Cathy from his life. The fertility of the land just like the charm of Cathy is no more of any use to him and hence he moves away - this is because, right from the time he settled down in the Salinas Valley he has been identifying the land with his wife and in his mind there is a muddled picture of his wife inextricably confused with his Eden. Her desertion results in his abandoning his ranch.

Thus John Steinbeck's treatment of the subject of the interminable bond between man and land accords him high esteem as a writer who has understood the essence of life. His compassion for mankind, which is hapless before the whimsical and furious Nature is brought out in all the Novels. At the same time he has also highlighted man's callous attitude towards land, which he takes for granted and the sufferings that befall him as an aftermath. Viewed from this angle, he can even be considered as a pioneer environmentalist, whose concern is the preservation and protection of the land we live upon for:

He does not fail to examine for the first time in his fiction the ecological question, spelling out the root cause of that environmental disaster : the indiscriminate ploughing of marginal land and the overuse of soil, the plundering of the wells and the depletion of the subsoil moisture : ... (Simmonds 324)

In general, the men and women portrayed in the novels of Steinbeck are individuals or group beings but mostly seeking out human and spiritual values. The human endeavors portrayed in his novels reveal the essence of man. The inseparable bond between man and nature dealt with in the novels reveals his insight into man's ability to transform as a response to the vagrancies of nature in a move not only to adapt to the changing situations but also to establish his position in the arrangement of things "and so in man, according to Steinbeck, what counts, what alone matters, is life, its preservation, its transmission ..." (simmonds 324)

References

- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. 1939. Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1972.
- - -. *East of Eden*. New York: Bantam Books, 1974.
- Simmonds, Roy S. *Steinbeck's Literary Achievements*. Millwood: Kraus, 1980.
- Lisca, Peter. *Preface. The Grapes of Wrath: Text and Criticism*. ed. Peter Lisca. New York: Viking, 1972.
- - -. *The Grapes of Wrath 1958. Steinbeck: A Collection of Critical Essays*. ed. Robert Murray Davis. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972.