

## **Rise And Fall of Modern American Society and John Steinbeck's Literary Female Characters**

**Maryam Omrany**

MA student, Department of English language and literature, Islamic Azad University, Jieroft Branch

**Kian Pishkar\***

Assistant Professor of English Language Teaching, Department of English language and literature, Islamic Azad University, Jieroft Branch

### **Abstract**

This study is significant because it provides ways to analyze power from an angle that empowers women. Although Steinbeck had presented his women characters as sophisticated modern women who are liberated and powerful in leading their lives, the reality in the world still maintains that women are at the secondary position in comparison to men. By altering the presentation of women in literature, the researcher delivers the importance of power in women's lives as it enables women empower their own lives to a certain extent if not entirely. Hence, the researcher discovers that the knowledge of power is as important as the power of knowledge in women's lives.

**Key words:** Modern American society, John Steinbeck, feminism, Antifeminism

### **INTRODUCTION**

The research is an attempt to investigate the needs of the learner of literature and characterization of women, which are applied in the study of the selected novels of Steinbeck's fiction. It aims to fulfill the following Man-woman relationship forms the main theme of the novels of Steinbeck. As a result, the novels have the theme of sex as an important theme.

It is limited to six selected novels written by Steinbeck, although he has produced a wide range of literary works. In order for the research to be productive, it is essential for the researcher to choose a manageable number of novels. Therefore, considering the time factor, the researcher finds it practical to research only six novels of the author. It intends to look at the element of women power; the researcher ensures that there are sufficient women characters in the chosen novels in order to meet the purpose of the study. Moreover, Steinbeck normally constructs his novels with a limited number of characters, thus the researcher ensured that the selected novels included women characters. It is also crucial to understand that this study concentrates specifically on women characters of Steinbeck's chosen novels. It is important to understand that, the notion of women and the element of power in other works of this author may differ. The range and type of

power bestowed upon the women characters in Steinbeck's other novels and short stories may assert the same idea of liberation as in selected novels.

Women, in Steinbeck's novels embody the author's quest for psychological insight, awareness and harmony. They are the focal point of contact between the writer's consciousness and the world from which they are alienated. His women, therefore, have to face conflicts make effort to break away, to assert their individuality and think whether their decision to do so is the right one, how to resolve the identity crisis and emerge victorious from the trauma. These are some of the questions Steinbeck seems to explore through his women characters. Her themes certainly touch the raw nerves of human experience.

Among topics to be discussed in this analysis, especial attention will be given to the domestic theme as well as the experiences that Steinbeck's women characters had during their exodus from Oklahoma during The Dust Bowl to California's promised land. Most of the experiences female characters had took place on the road, and they appear to reinforce the contrast between the private and the public, especially because the characters are portrayed in historical context – the great economic depression of the 1930s, –which changed the role of the male in the American society, as well as the female role, since American women were required to join the work force in order to improve the family's income. In the U. S., the late thirties had an atmosphere of woman's independence in some professional aspects. The great depression years radicalized and awakened many women, who became feared and active once they were not the passive.

Throughout American Literature, women have been depicted in many different ways. A frequent societal stereotype of women and their position. Often times, male authors interpret society's views of women in a completely different nature than a female author would. While F. Scott Fitzgerald may represent his main female character as a victim in the 1920's, Zora Neale Hurston portrays hers as a strong, free-spirited.

Feminists and scholars have divided the movement into three separate waves and each of the waves is significant for the movement in achieving different goals Virginia Woolf, in probably the most notable pages of *A Room of One's Own*, states her argument about how women's talents have been wasted. Walters supports Woolf's argument and comments on it: "She contemplates a number of greatly talented women from the past, from the Duchess of Newcastle to George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte – who were deprived of experience, intercourse and travel and that is the reason they never wrote quite as powerfully and generously as they might have. Woolf also reasoned that a woman need money and a room of her own to be able to write." Nevertheless, it was not sooner than in the second half of the 19th century when organized campaigns, clubs and movements for women's rights emerged in order improve female condition in terms of education, opportunities to work outside their households, reform in laws affecting married women and, for the first time, for the right to vote. One of the first female groups was called the Ladies of Langham Palace, the name comes from their meeting place, and the movement was led by Barbara Leigh Smith. The group initiated many campaigns around issues that had already been clearly defined, for instance "women's urgent need for better education

and for increased possibilities of employment, as well as the improvement of the legal position of married women.

Steinbeck seems to have hit a political, cultural, and/or personal nerve in the nation. Apparently, a large number of Americans could relate to the conflicts, restrictions, and unhappiness of the Trasks and Hamiltons. Even though the war had ended, many that they were in great danger. After the United States exploded the horrifying bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending World War II, the majority of feared that they would soon become the target of a nuclear attack as well. According to Elaine Tyler May in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, this fear became even more prevalent when the U.S.S.R. proved it had manufactured an atomic bomb, exploding one in 1949. Once the Korean War broke out in 1950, many Americans believed that they would soon become victims of a nuclear-based World War III (16).

Desperation seems to swirl and infiltrate the shabby homes in which anxious women stand by their men to await the dust storms. The universality of both Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 establishes Steinbeck's use of the interchapter, a technique that accounts for about one-sixth of the novel and addresses both the setting and circumstance of the novel in a poetic, philosophical tone. These are panoramic, descriptive chapters, in which the narrator functions almost as a Greek chorus, delivering information about the sharecroppers' reactions to losing their land or the evolution of the land itself. Sometimes the chapters consist of snippets of dialogue and vignettes, through which readers may gain an understanding of that which confronted people like the Joads. Steinbeck scholar Peter Lisa says that this device "is reminiscent of the medieval mystery plays which dramatized Bible stories and made them real to common people." (Con Davis 51) Symbolism is prevalent in this book, and animal imagery is one that will be carried throughout the novel. Critic Brian E. Rails back suggests that a Darwinian approach is evident from the beginning—humans are merely a small part of the picture here, and the land turtle is the most extensive metaphor for the migrant worker, undefeatable, even with a nick on the shell, and bound west at all costs. In this world, Steinbeck seems to suggest, there are those that will go out of their way to make your passage a bit easier, as well as those who will plow into you for no discernable reason. Stuart L. Burns says that the actions and even the physical makeup of the turtle, who is first introduced in Chapter 3, foreshadow the plight of the Joad family.

Critic Frederic I. Carpenter suggests parallels between the character of Casey and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, a century earlier, had given up the ministry because of his own unorthodoxy and who began to associate his religious feelings with nature. Carpenter draws the corollary between Casey's and Emerson's associations of unity with holiness: "As Emerson phrased it, while discussing Nature: "The world lacks unity because man is disunited with himself.... Love is its demand." (Carpenter 317) This philosophy is reflected when Casey discusses his revelations about the "Holy Spirit and the Jesus road." When interchapter 5 opens, an immediate juxtaposition is established between the love and respect the tenant farmers feel for the land that's sustained them and the disregard of the landowners, who describe the bank as a living, breathing monster that must be fed. Steinbeck's diction emphasizes the force of the tractors and the callousness of their

drivers, who, for reasons of survival or politics, have no more regard for the land than the faceless banks: "Behind the harrows, the long seeders—twelve curved iron pens erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears; raping methodically, raping without passion." (46)

A feminist reading of *Of Mice and Men* might begin with an analysis of Steinbeck's description of Curley's wife. Feminist critics are often concerned with what is missing from the depiction of female characters, and in the case of the last element of tragedy on *Of Mice and Men*. There are actually many types or branches of feminist criticism, including but not limited to Marxist feminism and psychological feminism. . Each type has a different focus, but in each can be found the common purpose of locating in literature, mostly literature written by men, the marginalization and constraint of women in culture and society. One goal of such investigation is to illustrate patriarchal principles, the social and cultural ideas promoted as truths by dominant male literary voices and the bias against women that result from those ideas. Like any political attack, feminism is concerned with effecting social and cultural change by accenting in justice.

Two of the specific wrongs feminist critics analyze are the absence of women from meaningful discourse in literature, evident in the small number of works by female authors in the literary canon, and the distortion of female characters resulting in aims representation of femininity as abnormal. A feminist reading of *Of Mice and Men* might begin with an analysis of Steinbeck's description of Curley's wife. Feminist critics are often concerned with what is missing from the depiction of female characters, and in the case of Curley's wife, one of the most necessary elements of a defined self, a name, has been omitted. This is significant at two levels. First, without a name, the reader will have less sympathy for the character. Curley's wife does not seem as real a person as a character with a name, an identifying marker. Thus, her death at Lennie's hands is less tragic than if she were named. This leads to the second level of significance: without a name to distinguish her from other women and other wives, Curley's wife automatically becomes representative of women. Consequently, what applies to Curley's wife applies to all women. Since Steinbeck's presentation of Curley's wife can be considered negative, there is a resulting association of negativity toward women in general. The physical description of Curley's wife is a large part of her negative image. Before she even enters the story's action, Candy informs George and Lennie that Curley's wife is a tart, or wherewith an evil eye, distinguishing her as opposite from Slim, with his "Godlike eyes."

For although Steinbeck's success in creating a pattern has been acknowledged, criticism has been divided as to the effect of this achievement. On one side, it is claimed that this strong patterning creates a sense of contrivance and mechanical action,<sup>3</sup> and on the other, that the patterning actually gives a meaningful design to the story, a tone of classic fate.<sup>4</sup> What is obviously needed here is some objective critical tool for determining under what conditions a sense of inevitability (to use a neutral word) should be experienced, as mechanical contrivance, and when it should be experienced as catharsis effected by a sense of fate. Such a tool cannot be forged within the limits of this study; but it is possible to examine the particular circumstances of *Of Mice and Men* more closely before passing judgment. Although the three motifs of symbol, action, and language build up a strong pattern of inevitability, the movement is not unbroken. About midway in the novel

(chapters 3 and 4) there is set up a countermovement which seems to threaten the pattern. Up to this point the dream of "a house an' a couple of acres" seemed impossible of realization. Now it develops that George has an actual farm in mind (ten acres), knows the owners and why they want to sell it: "The ol' people that owns it is flat bust an' the ol' lady needs an operation." He even knows the price "six hundred dollars." Also, the old workman, Candy, is willing to buy a share in the dream with the three hundred dollars he has saved up. It appears that at the end of the month George and Lennie will have another hundred dollars and that quite possibly they "could swing her for that." In the following chapter this dream and its possibilities are further explored through Lennie's visit with Crooks, the power of the dream manifesting itself in Crooks's conversion from cynicism to optimism. But at the very height of his conversion the mice symbol reappears in the form of Curley's wife, who threatens the dream by bringing with her the harsh realities of the outside world and by arousing Lennie's interest. The function of Candy's and Crooks's interest and the sudden bringing of the dream within reasonable possibility is to interrupt, momentarily, the pattern, of inevitability. But, and this is very important, Steinbeck handles this interruption so that it does not actually reverse the situation. Rather, it insinuates a possibility. Thus, though working against the pattern, this countermovement makes that pattern more credible by creating the necessary ingredient of free will. The story achieves power through a delicate balance of the protagonists' free will and the force of circumstance.

In addition to imposing a sense of inevitability, this strong patterning of events performs the important function of extending the story's range of meanings. This can best be understood by reference to Hemingway's "fourth dimension," which has been defined by Joseph Warren Beach as an "aesthetic factor" achieved by the protagonists' repeated participation in some traditional "ritual or strategy,"<sup>5</sup> and by Malcolm Cowley as "the almost continual performance of rites and ceremonies" suggesting recurrent patterns of human experience.<sup>6</sup> The incremental motifs of symbol, action, and language which inform *Of Mice and Men* have precisely these effects. The simple story of two migrant workers' dream of a safe retreat, a "clean well-lighted place," becomes itself a pattern of archetype which exists on three levels. There is the obvious story level on a realistic plane, with its shocking climax. There is also the level of social protest, Steinbeck the reformer crying out against the exploitation of migrant workers. The third level is an allegorical one, its interpretation limited only by the ingenuity of the audience. It could be, as Carlos Baker suggests, "an allegory of Mind and Body."<sup>7</sup> Using the same kind of dichotomy, the story could also be about the dumb, clumsy, but strong mass of humanity and its shrewd manipulators. (Bloom, 2006)

Historical context is explored with the theory that many women were driven to illness by the lifestyle thrust upon them in the form of oppression and societal expectations. Examples are given of the injustice women faced and the medical procedures many had to undergo. Selected literature from the nineteenth century is analyzed, as well as the opposition female authors faced as they attempted to publish their work. Along with minor examples, two works are analyzed in connection to the topic: "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. A great deal of

women's illnesses in the nineteenth century were merely the result of their oppression, sometimes even something that was expected of them by the society in which they belonged.

Women authors of the nineteenth century faced a difficult task in getting their work published and acknowledged without harm to their person or reputation. Within the home or out in society, they faced heavy opposition each step of the way. This was not only the problem of female authors; women in general were silenced and oppressed and it is not surprising that many women suffered ill mental health as a result. Nineteenth century literature is colored by this in many ways, intentionally and unintentionally. Many women were probably happy with their lives, content in their roles. "The Yellow Wallpaper" gives a very grim view of the 'rest-cure' but not all reviews of the treatment were negative. English novelist Elizabeth Robins gave a positive account of the rest-cure in her 1893 novel *A Dark Lantern*, where her protagonist, Katherine Dereham, undergoes the treatment for what appears to be a broken heart rather than clinical depression. She ends up falling in love with her physician, Garth Vincent, and the book promises a happy future for the two.

Despite her positivity, it is easy to read more into the story. At closer inspection many of the same damaging elements can be found in her story that have been addressed by others. Garth does not listen to Katherine when she complains that the massage does not agree with her. He keeps forcing her to undergo this treatment despite it bringing her discomfort. He patronizes her at every turn and is a cruel and dominant man (Stiles, 8). However, he allows Katherine to write, therefore giving her an outlet for her creative energy, something which other doctors often did not permit. This may well be the reason why her experience is more positive than that of others and makes for a good juxtaposition with Gilman's experience of literary stifling. Equal rights have come a long way since the nineteenth century, yet women still face opposition that is both insidious and difficult to battle. One of many studies showed that if women's speech took up to thirty percent of the dialogue, it was perceived that the women were speaking more than the men in the group (Coates, 118). "Women have not been judged on the grounds of whether they talk more than men, but of whether they talk more than silent women. When silence is the desired state for women [...] then any talk in which a woman engages can be too much" (Spencer, 42). This is an echo of the critical voices in the nineteenth century when women were thought to be overtaking the literary market, even if they were a mere twenty percent of the writers at the time. The silencing of women was without a doubt a contributor to the increase in mental illness. Elísabet Rákel Sigurðardóttir September (2013).

The word feminism comes from French word *feminisme* and according to the Cambridge online dictionary feminism is "the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state." The term 'feminism' itself is used to describe a cultural, political or economic movement aiming for equal rights for both women and men. Nonetheless, the terms 'feminism' and 'feminist' did not gain widespread meaning until the 1970s when they started to be used in the public parlance more frequently. The

feminist movement involves sociological and political theories concerning with gender difference issues. The movement has been here for many decades, and British women have started to fight against the oppression during mid 1850s when the first feminists started to advocate their thoughts about inequality and when the first suffragette movement emerged, since then women have started working on accomplishing their goals to have the same rights and to have the same position in society as men have. The feminist framework also indicates how problems are defined and the kinds of questions to be asked.

For example, according to definition in *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development* written by Jane L. Parpart et al inequality results from "the need to establish unequal incentives to motivate the most talented people to do the most important jobs efficiently in society," other definition from the same book also says that the inequality results from "the practice of providing differential rewards to keep a less powerful working class fragmented by gender and race." Britain as well as France were among the first countries where women started fighting for their rights, education, and above all respect. Simone de Beauvoir wrote that "the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex was when Christine de Pizan wrote *Epitre au Dieud'Amour* (Epistle to the God of Love) in the 15th century." It was not until the early 19th century when women began to achieve changes in society, it was Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the commanding *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, who received the lion's share of attention. Wollstonecraft was a woman who, as Arianne Chernock says in her book *Men and the Making of Modern British Feminism*, "spoke up, quite loudly, for what had been until then a largely silent section of the human race. Scholars, even today, consider Mary Wollstonecraft to be a founding mother of British feminism and her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* can be considered as a first unambiguous feminist work. In addition, one of the main social reformers of early 19th century was also Florence Nightingale, who was convicted that women had "all the potential of men but none of the opportunities," she pioneered the importance of nursing schools and also advocated better education for women. Nonetheless, not only women tried to establish equal opportunities for both sexes, feminist men also helped advance women's liberation, although there were not many of them.

Sandra Beatty seems to equate female and motherly wisdom solely with the act of reproduction, but nowhere in the novel does Steinbeck ever specifically allude to Ma Joad's reproductive qualities.

Nellie Y. McKay takes from Elizabeth Janeway idea that "there is no scientific basis for the male-constructed definition of women's nature, and that opinions on the biological aspects of women's inability to perform as well as men in areas . . . are not facts, but are rather social mythology based on . . . a particular set of values" . Thus, gender role myths "define the „natural“ capabilities of women in ways that make women socially and economically dependent on men". (Heinz 2011)

McKay's main criticism of Ma Joad is the fact that she undermines her traditional role as wife and mother by taking authority in the family and fostering their will to survive only to quickly return to, since the feminine land deceives the men, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon

in their roles as ““ good“ poor mothers and mothers to be” represent “positive bearers of social value”. Adair merely sees Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon as “acting only in the best interest of the male power structure they hope to reinforce and reestablish” In support of her pessimistic view of Ma Joad, Adair provides several elucidating examples from the novel. She maintains that the often positively interpreted description of Ma Joad early in the novel is not actually a favorable account. Instead of evoking images of strength and leadership, Adair demonstrates that phrases such as “heavy, but not fat; thick with childbearing and work,” “high calm and superhuman understanding,” and “goddess” actually reinforce Ma’s role as “the object of male enunciation. Body without agency, she is simply a vehicle for bearing, supporting, and nurturing her „family of man.”

Steinbeck’s fictional characters were not the only ones facing loneliness, as this same feeling was also anchored within the writer himself. Michael Meyer (2009), says in his book *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck’s of Mice and Men* that even though his success as a writer was positive, he felt that the critical public’s praise and his popularity entailed considerable loneliness and isolation. The feeling of loneliness had accompanied him since he was a child and teenager but increased substantially when he became a great success in the literary world. He found it difficult to handle criticism and felt underappreciated and misunderstood, feeling as well that he did not belong to any particular group in the literary world.

By creating the characters of Crooks and Curley’s wife, Steinbeck manages to draw a very clear picture of the racism and sexism thriving in society at that time. At the same time, he shows the ignorance among other people regarding these moral issues. Candy, Crooks and Curley’s wife, are dealing with great loneliness as they are set aside due to their age, race and sex. To begin with Candy’s loneliness was not as strong as Crooks’ and Curley’s wife because he at least had his dog by his side. But once the dog is put down, Candy finds himself in the same position as Crooks and Curley’s wife, completely on his own, with no one to turn to. All of them desire nothing more than someone’s comfort and companionship, someone who is willing to accept them and be there for them. Accordingly, it is no wonder that they envy Lennie of having George by his side even though he is mentally disabled, which according to the ethos of the 1930s meant that he should have been set aside just like Candy, Crooks and Curley’s wife. Instead he has a dear friend who would not abandon him, no matter what. . (Halldórsdóttir 2017)

As Beth Everest (1988) explains, “the historical realities of the times of both the writing and the setting must be taken into account. Women did not enjoy the freedom they do in today’s society, but were corseted in the ways they could develop and express their character [...]” (22-23). (Woods 2018)

Through his depictions of Kate, Liza, and Abra, Steinbeck communicates the limitations of contemporary society’s idea of femininity. During the 1950s, American women in an effort to establish the nuclear family and assist in stabilizing the nation during a time of chaos created by the Cold War were expected to resume the role of homemaker. In order to escape this restrictive domestic role, East of Eden’s Kate deviates from the norm and uses her sexuality to acquire independence and power. Juxtaposed to the



characterization of Kate, Liza is portrayed as the domestic icon. Even as a maternal figure, Liza's lack of sexuality as well as her lack of tenderness discloses that the domestic idol, which the majority of women of the nuclear era were expected to live up to, was actually a façade.

Briffault's explanation of how primitive societies handle death is also apparent in Ma's care for the dead. Briffault contends that throughout primitive society, lamentations and mourning is performed by the women. All wailing, however ritualistic, devolves everywhere upon the women, and the care of the dead is usually their function. Ma's function as care taker to the sick transitions into care-taker of the dead, especially as the elderly Joads lives come to an end. The duty of disposing of Grampa's body certainly, as Briffault (1959) notes, devolves upon Ma, which Pa makes clear when he asks her the seemingly rhetorical question You'll lay im out? She is very methodical and ritualistic in her treatment of Grampa's body: For a moment, Ma looked down at the dead old man. And then in pity she tore a strip from her own apron and tied up his jaw. She straightened his limbs, folded his hands over his chest. She held his eyelids down and laid a silver piece on each one. She buttoned his shirt and washed his face. At the beginning of each short sentence describing the scene, Steinbeck uses the feminine pronoun she so as to repeatedly instill within the reader's mind that it is a primary duty of women to care for the dead. He also reiterates this fact in his description of Pa and Sairy Wilson's involvement. Even though it is his own father who has died, Pa simply provides the "two half-dollars "that Ma ritualistically places on Grampa's eyes Sairy, on the other hand, asks to assist Ma, which again shows Steinbeck's reliance on Briffault's notion of women's role in death since no man offers to help or seems capable of helping.

Steinbeck's fictional characters were not the only ones facing loneliness, as this same feeling was also anchored within the writer himself. Michael Meyer (2007), says in his book *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck's of Mice and Men* that even though his success as a writer was positive, he felt that the critical public's praise and his popularity entailed considerable loneliness and isolation. The feeling of loneliness had accompanied him since he was a child and teenager but increased substantially when he became a great success in the literary world. He found it difficult to handle criticism and felt underappreciated and misunderstood, feeling as well that he did not belong to any particular group in the literary world. Consequently, he withdrew and was tentative in his interactions with other people. It is therefore not surprising that this feeling of loneliness, that he knew so well himself, appeared in many of his most famous characters (Meyer 291). Steinbeck's unique approach to the themes of homelessness and loneliness, where he places two men who have a very special friendship, despite being very different both mentally and physically, in the center of the story, distinguishes him from other writers. Furthermore, Meyer believes that Lennie and George demonstrate that character is the engine of a plot. (Halldórsdóttir 2017)

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