



## SOCIAL REALISM IN JOHN STEINBECK'S NOVELS

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### ABSTRACT

*“Reality is like a float that rides all efforts of the irritated mind to frame its definition, or a fish that swallows up all other forms of life and then drinks off the sea in which it swims.”*

- **Damian Grant**

*“And this I must fight against: any idea, religion or government, which limits or destroys the individual. This is what I am about.”*

- **John Steinbeck**

*The above line is universally acknowledged that pen is mightier than the sword, but Steinbeck's pen is mightier than many swords. Since Aristotle the master of wide subjects, up to the current writers, pen has been the correct weapon both for exposing the conditions of the prevailing society and also for finding remedial steps for getting rid of the ills which beset therein. Most of the writers criticize the society, but Steinbeck's maximum works explicit about the social realism of his age.*

**Key Words:** Realism, Migrants, Migration, Socialism.

### INTRODUCTION

Social Realism is an international art movement that includes the work of writers, painters, printmakers, photographers and all who draw attention to the everyday conditions of the working classes and the poor, and who are critical of the social structures that maintain these conditions.



The beginning of the Twentieth century may be regarded as a landmark in the social, political and literary history of America. Van Wyck Brooks says:

*“Every writer I came to know called himself a radical, committed to some program for changing and improving the world.”*

Americans dreamed of new Edens and Heavens and, strange enough, these dreams have continued haunting the American consciousness till this minute.

## Social Realism

*Of Mice and Men*, the novella, is Steinbeck’s second book about the plight of California workers. “Something that happened”, is the first title of this novel, then he changed as *Of Mice and Men*.

*“this novel is a study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone in the world.”*

- Ben Abramson

In this novel Steinbeck enters into the well – marked, clearly defined and undisputed social order in which the individual seeks the means to realize his dream. The dream itself is borrowed by the individual from the society he lives in. This novel mainly portrayed the social problems of farm labourers in America, George and Lennie are the main characters, they separated from the land owners and natives, that time both of them face more problems as a migrant.

When Lennie and George come to work on a new ranch, they are aliens among strangers. They sell their labour to earn means for the realization of their dream. Most of the time, they are devoted to the mental rehearsal of their dream. In this novel, Steinbeck picturized the real problems of Twentieth century America, especially about migrant labourers. Socially, psychologically this novel penned the life and problems of migrants.

Peter Lisca observes:

*“... in Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck extends the experience of two migrant workers to the human conditions.... On this level, perhaps the most important, Steinbeck is dramatizing the non-teleological philosophy which had such a great part in shaping In Dubious Battle as in Of Mice and Men”.*

*The Grapes of Wrath* may be called one of the most ambitious novels of Steinbeck’s series. It has been both admired as a great novel and criticised as “Social novel”. This novel deals with a number of sociological, political and economic aspects of an American family of Oklahoma in a specific time, the Great Depression of the twentieth century. It also signifies the inner life



of the protagonist family, named as Joad, their emotional, ethical, spiritual and intellectual position and its growth. It is a very significant record of Steinbeck's attitude and of human conditions which were to be used as materials for his great novels. The extremes of poverty, suffering, depression and injustice are vividly depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In a sense he was hoping that the projection of the microcosm will define the outlines of the macrocosm. As a result of seeing so much suffering, his tone has come down from social satire to compassion. He puts on the tone of a down-right realistic writer in his narration of the story of human suffering.

Steinbeck penned an epitome of mankind passing through various phases of life and operated upon by various forces of nature. He portrayed the picture of Americans in thirties.

Steinbeck's voice that dominates all scenes in the novel is the voice of "we" as against the voice of "I". The social and political setting, the position of agrarians, the economic condition, build the design of the microcosm which represents the macrocosmic world, in which the Joad family symbolizes the movement of humanity from a static position to an ever – growing social, moral and spiritual state of universal love. The Great Depression, the bad economic conditions and unjust political laws run parallel to the hunger, difficulties and sufferings in the physical journey undertaken by the Joads who are compelled to travel from the dust – bowl to California, which holds out the dream of plenty.

The first half of the novel takes place on the road as the family journeys to west from Oklahoma to California, the mythical land of plenty where they hope to begin a new life. The second half of the novel picturized on the family's struggle to survive in the Golden state as they are exploited by large landowners and persecuted by small – town bourgeoisie. The novel merely a propagandistic tract intended to mobilize those dispossessed by the economic disasters of the Great Depression, or appalled by the greedy excesses of uncontrolled capitalism, *The Grapes of Wrath* never would have achieved the status of an American society and political, social problems of America. Steinbeck intended to spark antipathy toward the inequities between the rich and poor of the depression era, and perhaps instigate a rebellion among his readers against the degradations suffered by the victims of the economic upheaval. This novel ends on a note of optimism and hope for the continuation of a boundless human spirit.

Steinbeck's *The Pearl* depicts the problems of Kino's family while he migrate to save his son's life. *The Pearl* is a work of consummate art and has a specific thematic structure. It has the force of a parable. This novel originally published in the *Women's Home Companion* as *The Pearl of the World*, Steinbeck's seventeenth book, *The Pearl* recounts the tale of a poor fisherman who finds a beautiful, valuable pearl. *The Pearl*, in Steinbeck's own words, is, "a strange piece of work, full of curious methods and figures. A folk-tale, I hope. A black-and-white story like parable". Instead of bringing him riches, however, the pearl only brings



misfortune until the fisherman is finally forced to throw it back into the sea. *The Pearl* is based on Steinbeck's friend Edward Ricketts own story.

On the surface it is a simple story of a man and a pearl, but it has the implication, the amplitude and the strength of a parable of purgation and salvation. The structure of the novel and its rich symbolism further reinforce the theme of temptation of possession leading to hell-like conditions and final salvation as a result of consequential renunciation. In fact the story symbolically becomes the story of the human soul falling from its state of innocence to experience and after passing through the crucible of sufferings rising to the state of redemption.

Kino, in *The Pearl*, is Steinbeck's study of a man who learns the laws of life from his personal fall and rise. Kino is an ordinary Indian who lives with his family in a hut by the sea, and is contented with simple necessities of life.

The discovery of the pearl not only creates an upheaval in the private psychological and emotional consciousness of Kino, but also sends waves of shock to the nervous system of the whole town. The only lucid voice is that of his wife, Juana, who warns him:

*"The thing is evil.... This pearl is like a sin; It will destroy us.... Throw it away, Kino.... It has brought evil.... Kino, my husband, it will destroy us". Kino declares: "This pearl has become my soul. If I give it up I shall lose my soul". But very soon the forces of violence, greed and evil creep around Kino and his family. In the darkness of the night, his assailants come and try to dispossess him of the pearl.*

Final part of the novel ends with pain of Kino's life. Kino wants to escape and he decides to run away from the town to go out into the world. The landscape on the way is highly symbolic of the state of affairs: "The land was waterless.... And underfoot was not soil but broken rock, split into cubes, great slabs, but none of it water-rounded... The singing heat lay over this desert country and ahead the stone mountains looked cool and welcoming". This scene symbolizes Kino's unspiritual journey through the wasteland. He has mountains before him and rocks without water, representing the spiritual chaos and death in Kino. Instead he kills the pursuers, he also loses his own loveable son in this act of escape. He comes back with his wife, Juana, who seems 'remote' and 'removed as Heaven'. He throws the pearl away with all his might. He is a free man now and he has regained peace of soul. The pearl is a parable of purgation and salvation relevant to the modern era.

By Steinbeck's use of symbols of idealism and betrayal drawn from the Bible, Shakespeare, American patriotic history, private and public morality, modern America's decline and corruption, the story of his characters become a kind of an epic of human life in America.



Steinbeck's characters are undoubtedly 'real characters' endowed with potential human qualities. They are the appropriate inhabitants of their microcosm and give us glimpses of human life in various grades, shades, ideas and perspectives. He chiefly concerned with the eternal stage of reality, the human consciousness, in which psychological, spiritual and social interplay of emotions, thoughts and actions takes place.

## Conclusion

Steinbeck's novels picturizes the real problems of Americans in twentieth century, especially *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Pearl* depict the social and political state of America and how migrant labourers suffered by the natives in thirties and how they tackle the problems in modern era.

Steinbeck has exposed many social evils such as hypocrisy, corruption, violence, unfair business practices and dehumanization. He has portrayed and condemned the social injustices in his novels. He has shown his concern for the less fortune by emphasizing the way society treats them as the growers in his novels to reduce the migrants to the level of animals. It is evident that there is no one emphasize like John Steinbeck, whose novels has spoken more eloquently for the migrants and marginalized.

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