



AN ECOHUMANISTIC PERCEPTION OF JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

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ABSTRACT

*Ecohumanism is a social and political movement. It is a combination of Ecocriticism and Humanism. It equates human and nature because both have been dominated and exploited by man. John Steinbeck, a celebrated writer and Nobel Prize winner of America, portrays his concern for nature and human in many of his works. His most famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* presents a realistic account of the sufferings of nature and human by man and technology. This paper is an exploration of the ecohumanist elements in the novel. Steinbeck manipulates plot and character to weave in his ecohumanist concerns. He stresses the interdependence of man and nature.*

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Ecohumanism, Man and Nature*

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are the supreme among the other beings of this great planet. Being the superior race, man tries to overpower every being on earth. Among the same race, the individuals seek pleasure on other men. Because of man's too much of intelligence and desire he thinks the other beings are inferior to him and his individual pleasure evokes him to increase the societal status but he suffocates the others. Man dominates not only men but also the other beings. Nature is the most valuable source of man but man never considers nature as a being



and also the most important source of human lives. On the part of humanistic approach man kills and dominates one another for his luxurious life style.

Ecocriticism is a study of relationship between literature and nature. It opposes the exploitation of nature as well as men. The term 'ecocriticism' was first introduced by William Rueckert in World Literary Association in USA in the year 1970. Later Cheryl Glotfelty dedicated a complete book for ecocriticism, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology*. While ecocriticism has its mainstream discipline, many interdisciplinary approaches are developing day by day. Each has its own focus like relating nature with women in particular and human in common.

Humanism and ecology combines to form Ecohumanism. Ecohumanism focuses on human's needs, interests and values. It stresses man's dependence on nature for their dwelling purpose. It argues that human beings cannot survive without nature. Nature bestows all that it has to humans while humans in turn does only harm. Ecohumanists stresses mutual coexistence of man and nature.

During early 1930s, a severe drought led to massive agricultural failure in southwest part of America mainly in Oklahoma and California. Because of the absence of rain, farmers who cultivated crops in such areas were greatly affected and were forced to leave their lands. In the following years of World War II huge dust storms blew across the sea causing death to number of people who were caught. The afflicted region was called as 'Dust Bowl'. The drought led to death of many farmers and their families. Hence, the era was called as Great depression era. The landowners were unable to recover their investment on crops, so the remaining farmers and their families were forced to leave their land. They all fled to the nearby farming place California. Soon, California was filled with huge number of migrant workers whose utmost need was mere survival. They were forced to face one problem after another. As the farm country became overcrowded, job and food were scarce. Many migrant workers starved to death.

John Steinbeck is a prolific writer of American literature. He has written sixteen novels of which most of the novels depicts his concern over man and nature. Being a humanist, he stresses that every man is equal and every man should enjoy equal rights. Steinbeck went on several trips to record the actual situation of a great crisis that was killing many migrants in his country. To get first hand information of migrant workers and their family, Steinbeck lived with an Oklahoma farmer family. He accompanied with them in their journey to California. He observed their life and hardships. Later, he portrayed it realistically in his writing and gave form to his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* which won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.



The Grapes of Wrath is such a striking novel that it won Steinbeck many awards and prizes. The novel is not a mere social protest but a parable. As it was published at the time of Depression era and its inception was sensational. Though the specific crisis that he dealt in the novel no more exists nevertheless the novel loses its appeal and success. Steinbeck had close association with Edward Ricketts, a marine biologist. Thus, he had an attitude to look over man in a biological view. He relates human beings; his characters to plants and animals. He has a firm belief in the spiritual comfort that nature offers and encourages earth-founded optimism.

The post-depression novels or trio of Steinbeck namely *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* deal with proletarian matter. Of these three novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* provides a faithful description of the critical period in American history. The Joads, the protagonists of *The Grapes of Wrath* stand for all of the Dust bowl farmers. They endure a series of difficulties in social, political and economic level. Shortage of rainfall results in drought which becomes worse. Crops are failing and the banks evict family from their farms. They bring in tractors that can do work of fifteen families at a same time: "The owners of the land came onto the land, or more often a spokesman for the owners came. . . .And at last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won't work anymore. One man on a tractor can take place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crops (TGOW 21)". Man turns inhuman to his fellow men. Men in form of land-owners, landlords and bankers who try to hoard more and more money seize the hope of life of their tenants.

Ecohumanists argue that the modern science and technology has killed the humanity in man. Man has become more materialistic that he buried his humanity in the deep earth. The landowners wanted to replace the tenants with a single machine that they could save their money. Humanity in them is long dead and they could not see that the tenants' life depends on that little wages that they offer. Thus, not only drought and poverty could be blamed as the reason for the people's migration to the other land, but also the man and technology which forced them to leave their land. Steinbeck describes the modern machines as monsters in the following lines.

The tractors came over the roads and into the fields . . . Snubnosed monsters, raising the dust The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; glove, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was a part of the monster, a robot in the seat. He could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth. (TGOW 24)



As they have nothing more to lose, the Joads decide to move westward to the promising land of California. They plan to migrate to the other country to find a new home, new hope and new livelihood. Tom Joad, the elder son of Joad, returns to his farm after four years of prison sentence. He meets Jim Casy who was a preacher and helped Tom to join labour organisation in the later part of the novel. Tom finds his farm deserted and learns from a neighbour that his family plans to move Westward from Oklahoma to California. Tom receives a warm welcome from his family members. The elder man of the family is Grampa Joad. He is the founder of Joad's farm. Even when there is no hope for their survival, he is reluctant to leave the farm where he has lived and uprooted. The family drags him to take him along with them but soon he dies.

Steinbeck uses the symbol of Joad's dog which met an accident soon after they leave their farm to relate the Grampa Joad's death which was to take place next. He dies of a stroke as if he could not bear to leave the land in which he lived for so many years. Steinbeck illustrates by his death that it will be real hard for a man who loved his land as like his fellow being to abandon and leave it behind. The Joad's family is forced to face much more hardships on their journey. A filling station operator demands double amount of money. The tenant farmers who were desperate to leave the land paid willingly, to the salesman's delight.

Joads could see that they are not the only people moving to California. Many people approach the city in a hope that they could get job and decent wages. But the country becomes overcrowded by migrants. All farmers face many difficulties on their journey. Greediness of the employers rises as they have more workers than their need. So they give them very low wages with which they could only survive and could not attain any profit. The money that they earn is spent for buying food in stores which are run by the landowners and hence the prices were also high. The migrants were oppressed and suppressed by the landowners. They were also kept under surveillance that no one could escape from their miserable situation. The owners of the farm were inhumane. They rob both the wealth of the land and strength of the workers. Man who must live harmoniously with land rather conquers it as he seizes it.

Tom Joad manages to escape from the farm and meets Jim Casy, his old friend. Jim who has left his job of preaching, is now engaged in organising labourers to fight for their rights. Eventually he generated many enemies among the landowners. The landowners paid huge amount of money to the police to kill him. Police hunts him and kills him. Out of rage, Tom kills the police and manages to escape. At the end of the novel, he took the job of organising the workers to fight against landowners.



CONCLUSION:

In our ecosphere all organisms including human beings are dependent on nature. But man fails to understand such truth. By the name of science and technology, he tries to overpower nature. Such an act will leave him only to his own destruction. Steinbeck's characters especially the farmers in *The Grapes of Wrath* love their environment and nature. But they are evacuated because of landowners greediness. They were deprived of land to live. With the portrayal of Joad's family and their hardships, Steinbeck has presented ecohumanistic stances to prove the interdependence of man and nature.

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