



LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF JOHN STEINBECK'S *EAST OF EDEN*

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and ecology which helps one to understand the value of nature and literature. Nature is being dominated and exploited by men. Man kills animals, landscapes and even his own race to fulfill his needs for sophistication. Man cannot live without nature and other beings. It is expressed by many literary writers. John Steinbeck is one among them whose works obviously exhibit the importance of nature. His East of Eden consists of the elements of ecocritical approach.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Landscape, Nature, Ecology.*

INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is the study of literature in relation with the environment. It can be said as an earth-centered approach in literary studies. This approach has its base on the ground that human culture is interconnected with the physical world. William Rueckert was the first person to use the term 'ecocriticism' in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in 1978. The term 'ecocriticism' is a combination of two words- ecology and criticism. The term 'eco' and 'critic' has its origin from Greek, 'oikos' and kritos respectively, which mean together 'house judge'. The oikos means nature and "the kritos is an arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order, no boots or dishes strewn about to ruin the original décor"(Glotfelty 69).

All ecological criticism holds the view that human culture is connected with the physical world. By the term ecocriticism Rueckert meant "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature"(Glotfelty xx). John W.Meeker introduced the term 'literary ecology' to refer to "the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in

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literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species”(Glotfelty xiv)

Steinbeck was born in 1902 in Salinas Valley. He had grown up in the richness of nature. He was enchanted by the beauty and splendor of the natural world. The region of Salinas Valley offered all the diversities of terrain. It held most fertile acres. In *John Steinbeck: Voice of the Land* Keith Ferrell gives a description of Salinas Valley:

Through the center of the valley, flanked by stands of willow and cottonwood, flowed the Salinas River. Mountains surrounded the valley. To the east stood the gentle Gabilan Range, its Spanish name taken from the hawks that soared in the high sky. To the west climbed the Santa Lucia Mountains, rugged peaks, some of which reached up a mile and more. Beyond the Santa Lucias the land sloped steeply down to meet the Pacific Ocean. (09)

In many of Steinbeck’s novels, the traces of Salinas Valley could be seen. As a lover of nature, he has always presented minute details of the beauty of the nature. To convey his fondness of his domicile he planned to name the novel (East of Eden) “Salinas Valley”. He also gave a thought of naming it “My Valley”. But at the course of writing, the novel turned out to be dealing with much more a universal theme and so his wife suggested him the title “East of Eden” which was taken from the genesis.

Steinbeck has presented a geographical picture of Salinas Valley in the very opening lines of the *East of Eden*: “The Salinas Valley is in Northern California. It is a long narrow scale between two ranges of mountains, and the Salinas River winds and twists up the center until it falls at last into Monterey Bay”(07). Steinbeck has presented many of his autobiographic elements in *East of Eden*. So he has recorded his childhood days when he lived in a very intimate bond with nature. He says, “I remember my childhood names for grasses and secret flowers. I remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer and what trees and seasons smelled like how people looked and walked and smelled even. The memory of odors is very rich”(07). The narrator is nostalgic in the lyrical description of the valley, recalling the sights, smells and other memories of his Salinas childhood. He also establishes the valley as a symbolic arena for the struggle between good and evil: the valley is enclosed by the inviting Gabilan Mountains to the east—“light gay mountains full of sun and loveliness”(07)—and the “dark and brooding”(07) Santa Lucia Mountains to the west.

He describes the history of Salinas Valley from the very beginning of its history. The Indians were the first to be settled in the uninhabited Salinas. They lived in complete harmony with nature. Though they were termed as lazy by the author, they did not have any slightest idea of dominating nature. They “. . . lived on grubs and grasshoppers and shell fish, too lazy to hunt



or fish. They ate what they could pick up and planted nothing. They pounded bitter acorns for flour. Even their warfare was a weary pantomime” (EOE 10).

Next people to invade were the Spaniards. Unlike the Indians, the Spaniards were materialistic. They began to capture the mountain and the forest which are the natural habitat of the living creatures. They drove away the wild animals from their living place.

. . . They gathered mountains and valleys, rivers and whole horizons, the way a man might now gain title to building lots. These tough, dried-up men moved restlessly up the coast and down. . . Periodically the owners killed the cattle for their hides and tallow and left the meat to the vultures and coyotes. (11)

Steinbeck has given a picture of how the early men exploited the nature for their own existence. The ruthless men tried to overpower nature by different means. They founded the philosophy that nature exists only for man. The followers of such a utilitarian philosophy naturally ruined nature for their own benefit. The need for the preservation of nature has been recognized today. There is much talk on eco-friendly systems in academic and administrative councils. To protect animals, organizations like PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of; Cruelty to Animals), WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) and IDA (In Defense of Animals) have been founded. .

William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* states:

The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community. This is what the ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude towards nature. (Glotfelty 107)

In the process of expanding his own species men started destroying nature thereby to extinction of his kind. The picture that Steinbeck portrays in the first chapter of *East of Eden* exposes how the early men destroy the natural world. When Spaniards did much for the disruption of nature, the Americans was no better than them.

Then the Americans came- more greedy because there was more of them. They took the lands, remade the laws to make their titles good. And farmholds spread over the land, first in the valleys and then up the foothill slopes, small wooden houses roofed with redwood shakes, corrals of split poles. Wherever a



trickle of water came out of the ground a house sprang up and a family began to grow and multiply. (EOE 12)

Man captured the wild landscape to expand his culture and civilization. As he tamed the land to his own need he began dominating it. As VeraL.Norwood puts it:

Masculine culture in America characteristically sees wilderness as a place for defining virility, for playing out aggressive, adventure seeking, sometimes violent impulses. Survival in a hostile environment is an ego-gratifying achievement and feeds the achievement –oriented male psyche, enabling man to return to civilization and improve their culture. (Glotfelty 324)

In *East of Eden* at one perception the destruction of nature could be seen while on the other the celebration of nature. Because of the technological advancement that the modern man enjoys he shows tendency to forget beneficiary aspect of nature. The early settlers of Salinas Valley got the privilege of naming the uninhabited places. They took the opportunity to credit the credence of nature thus:

Then places were named for animals and birds seen- Gabilanes for the hawks which flew in those mountains; Topo for the mole; Los Gatos for wild cats. The suggestions sometimes came from the nature of the place itself: Tassajara, a cup and saucer; Laguna Seca, a dry lake; Corral de Tierra for a fence of the earth; Paraiso because it was like heaven. The descriptive names followed: Paso de los Robles because of the oak trees; Los Laureles for the laurels; Tularcitos because of the reeds in the swamp; and Salinas for the alkali which was white as salt. (11)

Neil Evernden in his essay “Beyond Ecology” states that “The act of naming itself be a part of the process of establishing the sense of the place. This is fairly easy to understand in a personal sense, that is, giving personal names to special components of a place, but it also may apply to generic names”(Glotfelty 101). And thus naming a place gives a person who names it prove his oneness with the place.

On discussing the valley’s weather the narrator says that it comes in thirty-year cycles: five or six years of heavy rainfall, six or seven years of moderate rainfall, and then many years of dryness. He observes that:

The water came in a thirty-year cycle. There would be five or six wet and wonderful years when there might be nineteen to twenty inches of rain. And



then the dry years would come six or seven pretty good years of twelve to sixteen inches of rain. And then the dry years would come, and sometimes there would be only seven or eight inches of rain. The land dried up and the grasses headed out miserably a few inches high and great bare scabby places appeared in the valley. The live oaks got a crusty look and the sagebrush was gray. The land cracked and the springs dried up and the cattle listlessly nibbled dry twigs. Then the farmers and the ranchers would be filled with disgust for the Salinas Valley. The cows would grow thin and sometimes starved to death. People would haul water in barrels to their farms just for drinking. (08)

Salinas Valley's weather is noticeable that it in winter it is much fertile while on the spring it dries up where the Salinas River goes underground. Drought was a great enemy to the people of Salinas. "John(Steinbeck) heard the stories of legendary droughts seasons that had shaped the nature of the valley and its residents. One drought had stretched out over most of the 1870's. its death toll included more than 65,000 cattles. . . . Other years, the rains would be too heavy, overflowing the reservoirs beneath the mountains. Floodwaters crashed through the valley" (Ferrell 16). Salinas Valley has laid much effect on Steinbeck's mind that he could never move from its thought. Almost in all his works he shares his memories of Salinas, even when the days he was away home and settled in New York for the rest of the years. And thus Steinbeck's landscape and his memory are inseparable.

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