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Racism and the American Dream in John Steinbeck's
Of Mice and Men

R. Anitha, M.A., M.Phil.

Life in Great Depression

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* was first published in 1937. At the time, America was still suffering the grim aftermath of the Depression. The itinerant workers who form the basis of the novel were very much within the consciousness of a nation separated by wealth, yet driven by the idea of "the American Dream". Like many other novelists of this period Steinbeck also explores what was happening in the country during the Great depression.

Focus on Poor Farmers

The novel focuses mainly on the poor farmers of rural America. Because of the drought and the Great depression the bank owners foreclosed the farms in the Mid West. The farmers were driven from their home by drought, economic hardships and changes in the agriculture and industry.

The Structure

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Steinbeck conceived *Of Mice and Men* as a potential play. Each chapter is arranged as a scene, and each scene is confined to a single space: a secluded grove, a bunkhouse, and a barn. The setting is south of San Francisco in the Salina's valley of California.

The novella recounts the tragic story of George Milton and Lennie Small, two lonely itinerant farm workers who belong to nowhere and to no one but themselves. George has accepted the burden of protecting the mentally incompetent physically strong Lennie from the tricks of the ranch bosses and workers. On the other hand by doing so George has reduced the possibilities of his own attainment of independence and peace. George and Lennie beyond having found companionship, they have a dream of finding a fixed place they could call home and a farm of their own. This dream of course does not come to fruition.

“His voice rose nearly to a shout. "You crazy son-of-a-bitch. You keep me in hot water all of the time." He took on the elaborate manner of little girls when they are mimicking one another. "Jus" wanted to feel that girl's dress—jus' wanted to pet it like it was a mouse—Well, how the hell did she know you jus' wanted to feel her dress? She jerks back and you hold on like it was a mouse. She yells and we got to hide in an irrigation ditch all day with guys lookin' for us, and we got to sneak out in the dark and get outta the county”.

These lines show George's feeling towards Lennie.

Unfit to Live?

It was the period when people who were unable to work were seen by themselves and others as unfit to live. Both young and old generations of this period agreed that working was akin to living. With unemployment being an unfavorable option, many people's sense of helplessness lead them to kill a debilitated person. In this book Candy's dog and Lennie fall victim to mercy killing on the 1930's California ranch. Societal viewpoints, pity and unemployment were the cause of such tragedies, which Steinbeck employs to satirize the crooked ideals of 1930's America.

“Slim's words,” I wish't somebody'd shoot me if I got old an'a cripple” (41) reveals the general ideology of the time.

Introducing the Characters

Upon arrival at the ranch, Steinbeck takes the opportunity to introduce the reader, through the newcomers, the other characters. The author uses each of these characters in a different way to show loneliness and isolation experienced by each of them. In scenes such as this one, Steinbeck records a profound human truth: oppression does not come only from the hands of the strong or the powerful.

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The Dreams

Throughout the novella Steinbeck retells the dream of the characters living on the ranch. Itinerant workers only fulfill one step in their work on a farm. They seed the earth, or they haul in the crop. George and Lennie's words of "a few acres" speak of their dream of planting and gardening. It speaks on their longing to join the natural cycles of the world. Their talk of raising cows and drinking their milk, tending a vegetable garden contrasts their daily diet – a can beans.

Social Treatment of the Differently Challenged People

Another concept dealt by Steinbeck here is his characters are either fit or unfit for their social roles according to their physical and mental abilities. For example Candy and Crooks who are aged and crooked backed respectively are given menial tasks on the ranch. These people are treated disrespectfully. Lennie who is intellectually weak also faces the same fate. He lacks a basic sense of right and wrong, he is unable to look after himself. Though he is likeable when George is around, he is uncontrollable. He attracts scorn rather than sympathy for his impairments. Another notable example is Candy's dog. This dog that is judged offensive is shot dead. He is the symbol of cruel fate that awaits the feeble.

Human Suffering

Steinbeck set out to expose and chronicle the circumstances that cause human suffering. Here, George relates that loneliness is responsible for much of that suffering, a theory supported by many of the secondary characters. Throughout the story Candy, Crooks, and Curley's wife all give moving speeches about their loneliness and disappointments in life. Steinbeck stress that human beings are at their best when they have someone else with them for guidance and protection. George and Lennie are extremely lucky to have each other since most men do not enjoy this comfort especially people who exist on the margins of society.

The Place of Racism

Racism is undeniable and explicit in the text. This is a powerful force which ignites the tragedy of the storyline. It is one of the ideologies of America that had a devastating effect on the society. Ill-treatment of the blacks by the whites revealed through the unnatural position of the blacks in the ranch.

In *Of Mice and Men*, the Black, crippled and isolated Crooks is abused by the Whites. Crook's room is the part where we learn the inner lives of Crooks, Lennie, Curly's wife Candy. The setting of his room sheds light on the life of Crook's; it shows that he is a

man of learning yet very lonely. Because he is black, the other men shun him; he spends his time alone and better. Crook's is called the "stable nigger" throughout the novel.

The Forces of Evil

Steinbeck's use of symbolism like "A water snake glided smoothly up the pool, twisting its periscope head from side to side; and it swam the length of the pool and came to the legs of a motionless heron that stood in the shallows. A silent head and beak lanced down and plucked it out by the head, and the beak swallowed the little snake while its tail waved frantically". show how the forces of evil appear and cause the fall of humanity .He skillfully employs the snake to emphasize the predatory nature of the world and to foreshadow Lennie's imminent death. .

Itinerant Workers in India

In conclusion, it must be said that Steinbeck is able to highlight the loneliness of the itinerant workers, which is an outcome of the ideologies that prevent the kind of independence these characters long for. Steinbeck has made a nationwide problem human.

Steinbeck has been appreciated by many Indian writers for his devoted description of the poor and needy. However, our presentation of Indian itinerant workers is still rather scanty in literatures in Indian languages.

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