

Stereotyping of Curley's Wife in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*: From Derridean Perspective

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Abstract This paper demonstrates how a critical reading of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* reveals oppression on female character and unequal gender relationship. The paper attempts to examine Curley's wife with regard to feminist approach. Steinbeck has viewed only single female character in the novel as a devil incarnation, a symbolic Eve who burnt lives of men in paradise. The paper interprets the novel from Derrida's theory of Logocentrism which provide framework for the author to correspond in underlying logical assumption. It could be seen that the characterization of Curley's wife is not complimentary in the novel rather more of derogatory. She has been subjected to numerous fixed features of stereotyping by the ranchmen. Her tragic death has been justified as the only logical reason for bringing stability in men's world. The paper has intended to go through the issue of gender discrimination much more profoundly and has found the dominant viewpoint which has hijacked the whole atmosphere of the novel and certain group of characters has assigned fixed roles for woman and his roles for in society and family.

Keywords Oppression, Gender Relationship, Logocentrism, Stereotyping, Discrimination

1. Introduction

Derrida's Logocentrism fundamentally explores how male authors have targeted the female characters in their works. His preliminary research in phenomenology has put forward all the dominant thinking in western society. Logocentrism beholds the tradition of western knowledge (both Science and Philosophy) which consider language or any mode of representation as the basic expression of external reality. Logocentrism implies dichotomous structure which socially fabricate the privileged term of self/other. The structure upholds the system by which

concepts embedded in language has been defined in reciprocal determination with another term. Thus, this semantic opposition is presumed the role of hegemony over the "Other". The place of women in patriarchal society is normally represented as 'other' who is classified in terms of the absence, difference, impure and stereotyped. Poststructuralists present a radical critique on Logocentric language in literary text. In addition to that, they believed that such relationship only suit to western man which favoring "civilized white man". Therefore, Derrida brought forth various deconstructive reading strategies through which a specific literary text is analyzed and criticized in its varied manifestation. His theory of Phallogocentrism is hall mark of identifying binary opposition and also studied the discourse of meaning and value adhered to female.

Derrida's Phallogocentrism has contributed in the evolution of 'feminist criticism'. He believes that the contemporary literature has constructed femininity by assigning fixed features or gender stereotyping. Stereotypes are some distinctive features and images which western society has reinforced it on communities because of their color, race, nationality and sex orientation. These hierarchies of discrimination are broadly thought as an accurate portrayal of reality and thus, this incomplete or disturbed information resulted in facts without questions. Traditionally assigned role in shape of stereotypes had been carried out for ages. A thousand years of philosophy has been to prescribe fragile position of woman in the society. These stereotypes have been prevailed from generation to generation. Indeed, the foundation of globalization has ignored woman from their appropriate and legitimate rights. Emery (1992, p. 36) has viewed that "Stereotypically feminine, docile and submissive, dependent and lacking in self-assertiveness".

Steinbeck's representation of female characters in his novels is widely objected by the critics. *Of Mice and Men* is typically not admirable and less complimentary for female portrayal. His writings more obviously convey the message of derogatory intentions. The critics have also detested his

delineation of female, regardless of whether in support of the author, demonstrates the need and discontent of progressively genuine and unbiased appraisal of female characters. *Of Mice and Men* narrates the fulfillment of a dream—that confluence the man-oriented fraternity not simply to subdue, rather expel woman and femininity. Steinbeck has ironically shown the apathy to Curley's wife who for him a soulless animal which exists for nothing. Magny (1953, p. 147) writes “on the scarcity of women and abundance of prostitute in Steinbeck’s work”. Regardless, Steinbeck has additionally traveled to display an absence of sane female characters and plentitude of prostitutes in his novels. All the female characters in his novels are assumed as insufficiently constructed. Lisca (1978) pointed out that male relationship not women were the focus.

2. Literature Review

Emery (1992) has textually analyzed *Of Mice and Men* which she concluded that Steinbeck is thus represent a “chronicle of America’s social inequities”. *Of Mice and Men* is assumed in the paper as a critique of our fundamental injustice in society. She explores the relationship between George and Lennie, in the duality of masculinity and femininity; their partnership has been considered as a kind of marriage.

Rich & Ruby (1994) writes that *Of Mice and Men* has become a classic in our culture and one characteristic of dramatic classics is that they contain characters who invite endless new portrayals, characters who present challenges for each new generation of actors. What else accounts for the numerous film versions of Hamlet, just in our generation? And while I don’t mean to suggest any analogy between Curley’s wife and Hamlet, they both embody puzzles for their interpreters. Steinbeck understood the sexual objectification of this character, her limitations in a masculine society.

Gladstein (2002) states that *Of Mice and Men* gives a further indication of the impact of the time of production on how Curley’s wife is portrayed in the 1992 film where “Foote’s ingression of the contemporary issue of wife-abuse”. This is accomplished in another of the few instances where Foote does tamper with Steinbeck’s plot by adding a scene that clearly conveys an image of this woman as victim, more sinned against than sinner.

Momanyi (2007) has analyzed Waswahili literature which upholds the patriarchal Symbolic Order. The language has been used, according to her; the novel is “designed to maintain sexuality as binary opposition”. In *Of Mice and Men*, Curley’s wife is thought of a sexual desire by the ranch workers.

Ansari (2015) has also viewed that “male authored literature works in prejudice direction” where everything is measured in concepts of patriarchal system. John Steinbeck has been criticized mostly from the critic’s milieu that he

used abusive language towards women or presented them as tool in the hands of men. In *Of Mice and Men*, there is only one character which is female and certain indication of women like Suzzy’s house which is a brothel where men used get fresh. The death of Curley’s wife in the novel is horrible to study it.

3. Problem Statement

The study of gender inequality and marginalizing women are Poststructuralist-feminist perspective. The theory has formed to explore the discourse through which women are subdued by attaching stereotypes to her as an absolute truth. Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* deals with feminist issue. He deliberately portrays negative features of female character. The male characters in the novel keep specific images in their mind and she is judged through these fixed features.

4. Methodology

This research forms on qualitative method of textual analysis. The research is entirely feminist criticism which looks for analyzing the role of gender in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. The feminist criticism has two aspects: first, feminist critique (the analysis of works by male authors, especially in the depiction of women). Secondly, gynocriticism (the study of women’s writing). The analysis of novel based on feminist critique which investigates gender discrimination by using the technique of Binary Opposition which influences the creation and reception of literary works. In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck has portrayed economic disabilities in patriarchal society that has prevented Curley’s wife from realizing their creative possibilities and her cultural identification has been presented by the author as merely negative object or “other”, to man as the defining and dominant “Subject”. The followings are certain theoretical notions held in feminist criticism which are likely to be found in the novel.

- I. Civilization is pervasively patriarchal. (In case of Curley’s wife, she is only one female character)
- II. “Gender” is largely or if not entirely, cultural constructs.
- III. The lack of autonomous female role model, and beseech her to identify herself by presuming male values. (Presenting distorted representation (images) of Curley’s wife in the novel)

Therefore, Steinbeck seems to celebrate the realistic representations of women and brought to light neglected works by and about women. The research seeks to expose the “politics” of self-interest that led the reader to create stereotypical images of a female and generalize it on their society.

The analysis of the novel has been designed from

inductive reasoning. The selected data has been gathered from the novel which forms inferential link between the premises and conclusion. The inductive argument is then meaningfully supported from the authorities of secondary sources which make a cogent argument.

5. Stereotypes on the Character of Curley's Wife

In *Of Mice and Men*, two characters have been stereotyped: Crooks and Curley's wife. Crooks has been generally overlooked due to color of the skin on the other hand, Curley's wife has been marginalized by virtue of her gender. In the novel, she has not been deprived of her name; she is essentially called as Curley's wife. The male characters have given their names, however Curley's wife is not (expect Aunt Clara). Most importantly, she is the only single woman character. She has been found in the novel as banal, anonymous, and always discontent. The readers may have moved to sensitivity and feel apathy for a delicate or calm woman. It is likely to perceive that Candy, a disabled elderly man has in the novel occupies a higher status than a woman. Lennie, who is mentally retarded and Crooks, who is in his handicapped back position are in the world of men have given their names. So it is clear that other marginalized characters have been given the names but except for Curley's wife who because of her identity, she has been twice marginalized. Spilka (1974, p. 166) views "as if she had no personal identity for him. He has presented her, in the novel, as futile, provocative, and malicious". The ranch men in the novel have deliberately stereotyped her. It is found that their experience about women acquired from "old Suzy" and her young woman around the neighborhood. Curley's Wife accommodates the pigeonholing by acting seductress, stimulating her envious husband, is as compelling as he is loathsome.

Steinbeck has attached various stereotyped which are assigned to Curley's wife. The one stereotyped which is discernible that she is **Sexist**. George (2005, p. 65) points out that "Curley's wife interprets herself as a commodity, an object of sensuality". The underlying description of Curley's wife has been demonstrated as callous and charming vamp. She has been symbolized as Eve in the Garden of Eden. She brings the wrath of sinister into the lives of men by luring those who would not endure. Hence, her first appearance clarifies Steinbeck's intention of delineating a whore of any Cat house who endeavors to elude the itinerant workers by snaring them through sexual ferment.

"Sexism" becomes apparent in the novel when the male characters have begun to call her a derogatory name. The workers in the ranch are accepting that since she has been shown as flirt woman and though that she will ultimately harm us from her slanderous behavior. This thinking

prevails in all men when they are assuming that she has an eye for everyone and they are continuously accusing because of such act. In this way, they have no regard and look towards her as merely a sexual object. In addition to that, Curley's response to his wife is deplorable. Curley's association with her is demonstrated in sexual one; more often it shows his attitude towards her as despicable and savage. Candy uncovers to George about his treatment to her. He told him about the glove he wears in his left hand. He poured Vaseline on it for the purpose to make his hand soft and delicate. Curley is trying to abuse her sexually by touching her vagina to excite orgasm. This obnoxiously symbolizes the entrapment of husband and wife in common sexual exploitation. Spilka (1974, p. 173) describes "Curley's glove full of Vaseline, which softens the hand that strokes his wife's genitals". Therefore, Steinbeck represents her as a tool or manipulator for the satisfaction of men.

The second stereotyped which is attached to the character of Curley's wife is the notion of housewife. A woman in western ideology has always a better position as housewife. Accordingly, housewives are eternally assumed to be happy when they stay at home, as a janitor and babysitter. The housewife concept assigns the fixed role for the women who are paste against the wall. Women do have their aims and dreams but that are not realized because western men have been given their proper place for living at home. It is true from the context of the novel that Steinbeck is invariably accused of not giving legitimate position to Curley's wife. It is obvious from the novel that she has been forbidden for getting entered into the ranch and except for one place which has emphasized for her, is her house. The action towards Curley's wife is approved by ranch men; besides they overwhelmingly opposed her appearance in the bunk house.

In *Chapter Three* of the novel, Curley is looking for his wife when he visits the bunk house. In the act of suspicion and jealousy, he pursues Slim to the stable. Be that as it may, Curley apologizes to Slim for denouncing him in messing around his wife. Carlson indignantly remarks to him that he ought to drape firmly round in her home where she has a right place. It explains the patriarchal outlook of Carlson and upholds how Curley's wife shows up totally unfit and has been assumed that she is dependably on the sideline never completely allowed to share ordinary activities with everyone.

Curley's wife has been portrayed by Steinbeck as lonely and secluded character which is evident as the single female in the novel. Therefore, her isolation abides the mark of stereotyped. She tries to engage and obtain the attention of the men in the ranch in order to relieve herself from the boredom and monotony. It is due to the fact that whenever she tries to engage with ranchmen, they push her away from themselves. It appears that all men in the ranch generally consider that women should be properly

defined in the theory of her home. In addition to that, her dreams and desires are confined to the hopes and wishes of her husband and home. Her heterosexual desire has been meticulously policed, toward the day's end, dispatched to the margins and combined into the capitalistic economy which expresses the regularization of the world of ranch. According to Spilka (1974, p. 169) "Steinbeck calls this woman a "monster" and says he will prove to his readers that such monsters actually exist".

The *Chapter Four* is most significant and relevant to this context. It seems that all marginalized characters have gathered who have been intrinsically isolated and diverse. The scene where Curley's wife breaks into the men's daydreaming; it is no longer a surprise for her to watch all the weak characters is tossed here. When she is standing at the doorway, Candy and Crooks are overlooking her except for Lennie who is enchanted. She is asserting to them that she is seeking her husband and extends her request to converse with them. Candy advised her critically that she had a spouse and she should not be fooling around with them. Up until now, her principle reason is to relieve her from mental crumbling effect of dejection and therefore, her isolation is keep on as a fixed image for women in society.

Steinbeck as in entire novel delineates Curley's wife with respect to the presence and reaction of the ranch men towards her. The ranch men have stereotyped her by calling as "tart", "jailbait" and other various distorted names. In *Chapter five*, when she is narrating her story of the lost dreams to Lennie, the anecdote critically evaluate a distinctive perspective of her nature. Her current situation is the outcome of gradual succession to the terrible decision and hopeless situation. She lost the opportunity in motion picture because of her age and mother, or might be her retaliation; she ultimately patched up with Curley, inciting to an unaffectionate alliance with a man who always abuses her. She carries on with a disengaged life, without accomplice and industrious fear from her husband who usually pounds any person in sight. Despite of the fact, the activities and intimacy have disturbed the melancholy of her condition. Steinbeck narrates a record from her past which suggests that she is the victim of loneliness. Curley's wife justifies her disappointment as being the consequences of those conspiring to keep her from fame and popularity. She expresses that the night when she quarreled with her mother and that night she met Curley, whom she wedded later. She is cavalier as she speaks to Lennie, to Curley and correspondingly as caught with him as she did at home.

6. Conclusions

The research brings forth three different stereotypes that are attached to the character of Curley's wife. The

stereotypes are:

- I. Sexism
- II. Housewife
- III. Isolation

From the close study of the novel, the author has been charged as a sexist person. The period of 1930s in which the novel has been written, men are characterized as sexist. The novel implies how western culture worked in those days which is effectively scrutinize in the Derrida's theory of Phallogocentrism. In this way, when Steinbeck described Curley's wife, he portrayed her as how any man would be in that time.

Steinbeck has thoroughly demonstrated that Curley's wife falls short from the victim of sexism and each individual in the novel has looked towards her from a similar viewpoint. It is demonstrated that she has her own dreams and wishes; however the society has misused her on the grounds of her gender and afterward maltreatment from her husband. The wretched condition of Curley's wife in the novel is the reflection of the 20th century ideology which they were treating the women.

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