

Literature and Ecology: An Ecocritical Analysis of John Steinbeck's***East of Eden*****Dr.P. Sankavi**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Gobi Arts & Science College

Gobichettipalayam

sankaviprakash69@gmail.com

7373154545

Abstract:

The field of ecocriticism, which merges literary studies and ecological awareness, opens a pathway to appreciate and understand the interconnectedness of nature and literature. By exploring the complex relationship between literature, culture, and the physical environment, ecocriticism allows scholars to consider the escalating global ecological crisis from a literary perspective. The exploitation of nature by humanity is a recurring theme in literature, reflecting how human actions driven by a desire for control and advancement lead to environmental degradation, the loss of animal species, and even harm to other human beings. This dependency on nature, juxtaposed with humanity's damaging actions, reveals a paradox that many literary figures address in their works. One prominent example is American novelist John Steinbeck, who integrates the significance of nature deeply within his writing. His acclaimed novel *East of Eden*, published in 1952, stands as Steinbeck's magnum opus and reflects his ecocritical perspective. Through richly detailed landscapes and complex character interactions, *East of Eden* explores themes of human ambition, moral conflict, and the environmental consequences of humanity's actions. Steinbeck portrays nature not only as a setting but as a powerful, integral force within the human experience, illustrating the essential bond between people and the natural world. His work encourages readers to recognize the profound importance of ecological balance and the potential for literature to illuminate pressing environmental issues. This article aims to explore ecocriticism's role in revealing the relationship between literature and the environment. By examining John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, it highlights how literature reflects humanity's impact on nature, emphasizing ecological balance and raising awareness of environmental issues.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmental degradation, Human-nature relationship, Ecological crisis, Literary ecology

The study of literature in connection to the environment is known as ecocriticism. It may be described as an earth-centered method of literary analysis. This strategy is based on the idea that human culture and the physical environment are intertwined. In his 1978 article *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, William Rueckert used the word "ecocriticism" for the first time. The terms "ecology" and "criticism" are combined to form the phrase "ecocriticism." The words "eco" and "critic," which together mean "house judge," have their roots in the Greek words "oikos" and "kritos," respectively. 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" (Glottfelty 69).

The premise of all ecological critique is that human civilization and the natural environment are intertwined. By the term ecocriticism Rueckert meant "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Glottfelty xx). John W. Meeker introduced the term 'literary ecology' to refer to "the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species" (Glottfelty xiv).

Steinbeck was born in Salinas Valley in 1902. He had a great natural environment to grow up in. The wonder and majesty of the natural world mesmerised him. The Salinas Valley area provided all the different types of terrain. It contained the richest acres. Keith Ferrell describes the Salinas Valley in *John Steinbeck: Voice of the Land* as follows:

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)

Salinas Valley may be found in several of Steinbeck's novels. He has always highlighted the finer points of nature's beauty because he loves it. He intended to call the book (*East of Eden*) "Salinas Valley" to express how much he loved his home. He also considered calling it "My Valley." But, as the book was being written, it became clear that it dealt with a far more global issue, and his wife suggested the genesis-inspired title *East of Eden*.

In the very first words of *East of Eden*, Steinbeck provides a topographical description of the Salinas Valley: 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 provided many of his autobiographical components. As a result, he has documented the years of his boyhood when he had a very close relationship 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 poetic description of the valley by the narrator evokes nostalgia as he remembers the sights, sounds, and other experiences of his childhood in Salinas. Additionally, he establishes the valley as a metaphorical battleground for the struggle between good and evil. The valley is bounded to the east by the enticing Gabilan Mountains, which are described as light gay mountains full of sun and loveliness, and to the west by the Santa Lucia Mountains, which are described as dark and brooding. Beginning with its earliest days, he recounts the history of the Salinas Valley. The Salinas region was once populated by Indians. With nature, they coexisted peacefully. Notwithstanding the author's accusation that they were idle, they had no concept of nature's power over them.

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). The Spanish were the next to invade. The Spanish, in contrast to the Natives, were materialistic. They started capturing the forest and the mountain, which are home to many animals in their natural environment. The wild creatures were driven out of their habitat by them.

... 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 painted a picture of how early man took use of nature for their own survival. The brutal man-made various attempts to subdue nature. They laid the groundwork for the idea that nature only exists for humans. Naturally, those who adhered to such a utilitarian worldview destroyed nature for their personal gain.

Today, people are aware of the necessity to preserve nature. Environmentally friendly systems are a prominent topic in academic and administrative bodies. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and IDA (In Defence of Animals) were

created to protect animals. 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)

Men began destroying nature as they developed their own species, which led to the end of their race. Steinbeck shows how the early humans harmed the natural environment in the opening chapter of *East of Eden*. The Americans weren't much better than the Spaniards when it came to destroying nature.

Then the Americans came- greedier because there was more of them. They took the lands, remade the laws to make their titles good. And farm holds 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)

In order to further his culture and civilization, man has seized the natural terrain. He started ruling the land as he tamed it to suit his needs. According to Veral Norwood:

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)

On the one hand, it appeared that nature was being destroyed in *East of Eden*, while on the other, it was being celebrated. Modern man has a propensity to overlook the beneficial aspects of nature because of the technological advancements he enjoys. The privilege of naming the unoccupied areas belonged to the early residents of Salinas Valley. They used the occasion to affirm the validity of nature by doing the following:

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). So, giving a place a name allows the individual who names it to demonstrate his connection with the location.

The narrator claims that the weather in the valley experiences thirty-year cycles, with five or six years of very heavy rain, six or seven years of moderate rain, and then several years of drought. He notices 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)

The Salinas Valley has two distinct seasons, with the winter season being very fruitful and the spring season being dry when the Salinas River disappears underground. For the residents of Salinas, drought was a formidable foe. "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 cattle's. . . . Other years, the rains would be too heavy, overflowing the reservoirs beneath the mountains. Floodwaters crashed through the valley" (Ferrell 16).

Steinbeck's cognitive impression of Salinas Valley was so profound that he was unable to detach from it. Even after he was away from home and spent the rest of his life in

New York, he almost always includes recollections of Salinas in his writing. Steinbeck's memories and landscape are therefore strongly intertwined.

Works Cited

Ferrell, Keith. *John Steinbeck: The Voice of the Land*. New York: M Evans, 1986. Print.

Glotsfelty, Cheryl & Harold Fromm, eds. *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in*

Literary Ecology. London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.

Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. London: Penguin Books, 1952. Print.

