CHAPTER VII

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The gamut of American literature has many brilliant writers to its credit who have brought various laurels and accolades to America and American literature thereby positioning it as a prominent variant of World Literature.

A well-known name in American literature is that of John Steinbeck.

A resounding voice in American letters, John Steinbeck is a novelist who has enriched the genre with his innumerable works of fiction. A compassionate person, Steinbeck's writings are always centred on man and his daily struggle of survival. A conscientious writer he gave a frank expression of the downside of the American life in an attempt to raise awareness and bring about a social change.

Steinbeck emerged on the American literary arena during a period when the nation was grappling with various problems of depression and natural calamities. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 had dramatically closed the curtain on the prosperity of the twenties and precipitated the greatest economic decline in US history. Added to it the natural calamities further precipitated the nation's miseries. Drought in America's heartland turned the once rich soil to dust. Thousands were forced to abandon their farms, clogging the highways as they headed West in the hopes of finding a better life. In his novels Steinbeck gave an apt representation of the miserable situation of these people, their pain and anguish.
A considerate and compassionate human being he felt closely the pain of the common working class Americans: the farm workers, the migrants, the misfits and the alienated individual. There are many American writers who have written in the same vein of compassion and humanism but none have been able to attain the unique position of Steinbeck.

John Steinbeck stands apart from his contemporaries in the approach and treatment of his themes and narratives. He is a writer who has fused together the realms of arts and science in his fiction. He has promulgated the unique theory of biological view of life along with his firm belief in the theory of pragmatism or to be more precise his theory of non-teleological thinking. His religion is the religion based on life and its experiences that gives due recognition to the individual’s power to choose and formulate his own morals and precepts. Man is the citadel of his fiction: an entity with immense potentiality for goodness and endurance to survive and overcome.

The present research project has been undertaken to study in depth the essential qualities of Steinbeck as a novelist that stands him in a unique position not only on the American literary scene but in the entire range of World literature; namely his humanistic philosophy that is influenced to a large extent by his beliefs and experiences.

American fiction traces its rich heritage to the times when the first letters were written back home by the new settlers. From its humble beginnings as letters of travels and adventures it progressed to religious and later political prose and poetry. Further with the development of nationalistic fervour
American literature attained a position of its own in the hands of some of the best writers of prose, poetry and fiction. Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Hawthorne and later Mark Twain, Heminway, Passos, Faulknar, Bellow and Steinbeck amongst others are the ones who have shaped the passage of American letters to the present position of prominence that it claims in world literature.

Steinbeck who grew up in California's Salinas Valley, a culturally diverse place with a rich migratory and immigrant history imparted a regionalistic flavour to his writing, giving many of his works a distinct sense of place. Salinas, Monterey and parts of the San Joaquin Valley were the setting for many of his stories. The area is now sometimes referred to as "Steinbeck Country". Most of his early work dealt with subjects familiar to him from his formative years.

Steinbeck began his career as a novelist with his novel Cup of Gold. A prolific writer he wrote about twenty-three novels in his life time with his last incomplete novel The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights being published posthumously.

A highly acclaimed writer Steinbeck won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for his novel The Grapes of Wrath in 1940 and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. His voice was truly the voice of America: of its millions of working class people and migrant workers, striving and enduring against all odds in order to survive.
Steinbeck found an authentic voice by drawing upon direct memories of his life in California. He often populated his stories with struggling characters; his works examined the lives of the working class and migrant workers during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression and also reflected his wide range of interests, including marine biology, politics, religion, history, and mythology.

An interest in marine biology and his friendship with Ed Ricketts inspired Steinbeck to formulate his biological view of life that recognized a uniformity in all life and living beings; man as well as animal. Reminiscent of Emerson’s Oversoul, Steinbeck’s theory was influenced by the author’s observation of the tide pools that displayed similar behaviour to that of men. Steinbeck’s biological view of life gave birth to his important concept of group-man that makes its most dominant presence felt in his novel In Dubious Battle. Apart from the group-man theory Steinbeck also found similarities in men and animals that he expressed in his novels through animal and nature imagery depicting the deep affinity of man to animals. Lennie for instance is more of a dumb animal than an individual in Of Mice and Men. A major association or point of uniformity that Steinbeck recognizes and represents in his fiction is the instinct of survival which is the single genuine driving force in all life imparting to it the strength to endure and survive, and Ma Joad in The Grapes of Wrath affirms that everything seemed to be aimed at going on; to survive.

Steinbeck’s biological view of life was one of the important reasons for his development of another theory; the ‘is’ theory or non-teleological theory. A definite variant of the theory of pragmatism, Steinbeck’s non-teleological theory
does not study the cause of the matter, 'why' and instead tries to ascertain 'how' and 'what'. The theory invariably removes the blame from the individual and presents a deeper perception of life that develops a better and broader understanding of life and its situations. The theory bases its approach on the experiences of life than on dogmatic rules.

Characters in Steinbeck's fiction represent his pragmatic approach to life. Instead of vague speculations they indulge in undertaking practical solutions to practical problems. The theory is best given a reflection in the words of Casy in The Grapes of Wrath when he absolves man from all concept of sin proclaiming everything that has a life as holy.

Merged together with his non-teleological view of life is John Steinbeck's religious philosophy. Steinbeck never believed in any kind of dogmatic and rigid approach to life. His religion was the religion of love and compassion that encompassed the whole humanity in its scope. The Oversoul that he believed in addition to his vast reading of religious scriptures of Christianity as well as Oriental philosophies, Steinbeck grounded his faith in the spirit of man and in its essential goodness. Starting from his earlier novels religious influences can be traced in his novels to his reading of the Arthurian legends, Milton's Paradise Lost, the Upanishads, The Bible and books on Buddhism. Danny and his friends represent the Arthurian legend in Tortilla Flat and so do Lennie and George in Of Mice and Men. In Dubious Battle has a strong influence of Milton's Paradise Lost while The Bible makes its presence felt in The Grapes of Wrath and East of Eden.
Though Steinbeck's fiction has a strong influence of the various scriptures and religious books, yet the religion that he advocates is more than an adherence to their written word. His religion is the religion of man's empowerment to choose goodness over evil irrespective of the circumstances that finds an expression through 'timshel', 'thou mayest', thereby resting the power to choose and decide one's own path and beliefs based on one's experiences. Steinbeck's religion is the religion of love, of compassion; his religion is the religion of humanism that helps in the development of a broader acceptance of life with all its diversities and contradictions.

Humanistic philosophy is the basis of John Steinbeck's fiction. A major theme in all his novels his humanism covers the whole of humanity in a thread of compassionate feeling and brotherhood. It is humanitarian approach to life that enabled Steinbeck to feel so deeply for his less fortunate and impoverished brethren.

Steinbeck's humanism is evident in celebration of human relations, in unity, in friendship as between Danny and his friends in Tortilla Flat and Lennie and George in Of Mice and Men. The humanitarian cause finds a voice through some of his memorable characters like Doc Burton and Jim Casy, who are truly the author's spokesperson in the novels. The feelings of compassion and torment that the author expresses in his narratives; his concern for the weak and marginalized sections of people and individuals reflect his humanistic philosophy. His concern, beginning with a small community or family shifts to include the whole humanity. The novelist's concern for the individual caught up
in the conflict of good and evil and the importance of love, equality and dignity are also a reflection of his humanitarian concern.

Humanism is a strong and dominant theme in Steinbeck’s writings, a feature that finds an equal resonance in Indian English Fiction in the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand. Though culturally poles apart, Anand’s novels also reflect the same concern and compassion for the poor, the weak and the ostracized sections of society as found in the novels of Steinbeck. Both the novelists have tried to empower and free men from the shackles of poverty, misery, hunger and exploitation. Steinbeck more Christian in his beliefs than he ever accepted laid the foundation of his humanism on the basic Christian values of love and compassion; on man’s innate ability that will make goodness conquer over evil.

Humanitarian approach makes one socially conscious and aware of the flaws and drawbacks in society that thwarted all attempts at reconciliation of life to its basic tenets of love, brotherhood, equality and compassion. The natural reaction as a result is ‘Wrath’; anger at the flaws and the drawbacks. Steinbeck’s fiction are also a means to vent his anger at the negative aspects of American society; economic disparity, exploitation, racism, materialism and greed that harbours more evil.

Steinbeck’s fiction is the fiction of social protest. A theme that is dimly given a representation in his early novels like Tortilla Flat grows stronger with his subsequent novels of strike and disenchantment culminating into his major protest novel, The Grapes of Wrath, and gradually transforming into a psychological and moral protest in the East of Eden. Aware of the drawbacks of
his country Steinbeck tried to raise a voice of dissent against the existing situations in an attempt to change and improve them. Concerned with the lot of man he represented the strength, the power innate to all men to choose and change the situation, to choose good over evil.

Writing in a similar vein Anand also expresses a strong voice of protest in his fiction against society and those in power who misuse and abuse their power to dominate and exploit the weak and the poor for their own benefit. In his novels he depicts the contemporary situation of his nation where men are discriminated against men based upon caste and class. His social protest is woven into the themes that he chooses, the characters as well as the way in his treatment of them.

The economic injustices as well as the psychological and moral concerns are well wrought in the novels of Steinbeck giving an utterance to his anxiety over the contemporary situation of his nation and its people. His biological view of life, pragmatic approach, religion and social concern are all an expression of his most important belief; humanism. They are an expression of the humanistic philosophy of the author that binds together all life and nature into one whole: humanity.

As an artist Steinbeck has always been occupied with the timeless pattern of human life. At the heart of all his studies of men and women, of societies and ideologies, he finds the same basic reality manifesting itself, which he represents through his narratives and their characters.
Steinbeck was a master of manipulating experiences, people, and places, and fitting them perfectly into his works. His sources of inspiration came from his life experiences, people he knew, and places he went. Throughout Steinbeck's life, his many experiences were reflected in his novels.

The fiction of Steinbeck is abounding with some of the most resplendent characters. Humane in his approach he portrays characters with an impartiality and genuineness without passing any judgments or comments upon them. His novels are filled with the stories of struggling characters who fight against all odds in a test of endurance to survive and not succumb. In general, Steinbeck's characters can be divided along two lines: those who just do everything they can to help themselves, and those who cooperate so as to help both themselves and others. In Steinbeck's writings, for example, the greedy bank owners and crop growers who take advantage of the migrants are shown in a bad connotation. Steinbeck's message though, is that people should cooperate to offset such evil.

In his use of words, Steinbeck was very sensitive and judicious. He did not believe in the existence of a distinctive literary language contrary to the one spoken in common usage. He used the language of the common American men and women keeping in mind their distinctive forms of usage, expressions, and accents. Like his use of language, Steinbeck's imagery is also purely functional in the sense that they depict transcendence from mere representation of human activities. Elements of surrealism add touches of the magical into his fiction while his use of symbolism imparts a deeper meaning to the characters and their part in the context of the whole narrative structure, or the representation of 'life's
design’. Throughout his career as a novelist Steinbeck’s genius as a literary craftsmanship has grown and matured. His narrative technique is true to life and represents life and people authentically. A romantic, realist and naturalist, Steinbeck is essentially endowed with an existentialist view of life but not with a pessimistic bent of mind. In his fiction Steinbeck affirms his faith in the strength and potentiality of the human spirit which comes across through his optimism. His fiction though occasionally succumbing to failure resonates with an innate feature of optimism that helps his characters to endure and survive.

Steinbeck was not only an enthusiastic and determined spokesperson for man but also a devoted conservationist. His fiction is rich in nature imagery of the Salinas valley where he had grown up. The vibrant images of the landscape reflect his love for the environment. His biological view of life is also an expression of his concern for the ecology and environment.

Steinbeck uses many literary devices such as metaphors, similes, imagery, and figurative language along with excellent descriptive words to develop his characters and vividly describe their surroundings. His mastery of these and other techniques is the precise reason for their enduring popularity not only in America but throughout the world, like his novels The Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men, which have survived the test of time. John’s writing style was developed from the experiences in his life. His use of descriptions and literary devices, such as metaphors and similes, enables the characters to come to life for the reader. John’s vivid descriptions of nature really help the reader see the surroundings.
The novelist's use of interchapters like in The Grapes of Wrath have been successfully constructed so as to remind the reader that a traditionally intimate part of the true American spirit is embodied and manifested in the idea of cooperation, that each will help each and will work together. Steinbeck reminds of the historically development of the attribute of cooperation that helped give birth to the spirit and Constitution of the United States of America, and was the original impetus behind the generation of the distinctive American way of life. The 'yours' and 'mine' was sacrificed for the 'ours'; the sacrifice of the 'I' for the 'We', were crucial to the survival of the European immigrants on the North American continent. He also reminds us here that it was this very same cooperative spirit that was behind the development of the modern organized working class, and the growing labour unity; that fought back against excessive taxation and unfair work conditions. It was this transformation from 'I' to 'We' that finally began to establish some degree of justice in the work-place. The spirit of that fight for independence according to Steinbeck should still be alive and used against the political and social oppression.

It is Steinbeck's employment of Interchapters in The Grapes of Wrath that gives a glimpse into his creative genius. It shows just how creatively and effectively he has used his artistic potential to express the criticism of the prevailing social conditions. These literary techniques have allowed him as a writer to compress the energy of his disenchantment into small powerful units of information which forces the reader into a broader, deeper level of contemplation on the conditions under examination. The remainder, or the main
body of the work, then gives us a more personalized intimate view of these same conditions as they develop and work themselves out through the lives and experiences of the individual characters in the novels.

Steinbeck uses a variety of interesting techniques to share its message and create emotion within the story. The main storyline is continually interspersed with short sketches and narratives, or explanatory discussions that show what conditions of the era were like and what people were doing. Some of these interludes are used to create a general mood or to foreshadow events later in the story. One example of such a narrative sketch can be noted in chapter three, which is almost entirely devoted to the story of a land turtle crossing the highway in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The form and content of Steinbeck's artistic and narrative devices, the cut-away view of the American dilemma they reveal, and the provocative responses they continue to, or should, evoke in the modern reader, reflect probably the most creative and effective blend of art and politics from writers of the modern period. Steinbeck has effectively made his narrative techniques serve the most vital function of the modern artist and political realist. In an artistic and technical sense, Steinbeck is known for his acute sensitivity, passionate conviction and masterful ability at dramatization. He is indeed one of America's best storytellers. More specifically, however, he has followed a very successful tradition of bringing art and politics together in an attempt to increase awareness as to the critical nature of these 20th century social, political, economic dilemmas.
Steinbeck continues to reaffirm the importance of social change. According to him man must have the opportunity to be and express his inherent 'Manself' and that the social order should be reorganized so as to allow for that expression and inspire man to rise, to transcend the need to simply survive. Man needs to use and express the physical and mental creative forces he has been endowed with as he struggles to become truly human. Steinbeck's principle motive behind this strong focus on the concept of change is effectively 'wholistic' and mixed with the physical, emotional, the spiritual and the pragmatic.

A socially conscientious and aware writer Steinbeck has stood the test of time to emerge as a major American novelist. A victim of much controversy and criticism during his lifetime for his socialist and Marxist affiliations as well as for the apparent sentimentality in his novels, Steinbeck undoubtedly proved his mettle and universality. A renewed interest in his works world wide as well as the acceptance of his literary prominence in America is an evidence to the fact.

The present research is an attempt to recast the talent and genius of one the major writers of twentieth century English Literature whose works have transcended geographical and time barriers to emerge as works of humanitarian and social concern. Their universality and enduring charm have endeared John Steinbeck as a novelist, and his works as works of great importance in the contemporary era. John Steinbeck is truly a prime novelist of not only American literature but the World literature as well.

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