CHAPTER V

SUMMATION

This dissertation entitled *From Frustration to Affirmation – A Study of John Steinbeck’s Philosophy of Life with Reference to the Select Novels* contains three core chapters in addition to introduction and summation. In the preceding chapters, an attempt has been made to analyse the novels of John Steinbeck to probe into the common themes present in them. In the process, this study has enumerated all the three themes such as struggle for existence, group behavior and goodness in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Pearl* (1947), *Tortilla Flat* (1935), and *In Dubious Battle* (1936).

In the introductory chapter, the researcher has undertaken the study of the history of America from mid nineteenth to mid twentieth century. It concentrates on the Civil War, its impacts on America and its effects in the post World War-I period. After that, it focuses on the ‘Great Depression’ and ‘Dust Bowl’ that paved way for the creation of remarkable novels in the American Literature. Then, ‘lost generation’ writers were considered, the group of writers who had literary fame in the 1920s. a group of talented writers succeeded the lost generation in the US. The moral loss that was prevalent in the 1920s were pointed out by the writers like James T.Farrel, Gertrude Stein, John Dos Passos, and F.Scott Fitzgerald. John Steinbeck who wrote social novels decided to write about the peasants and workers of the low class.
Steinbeck got a good chance from Depression Era which made him to try writing on problems based on the shattered dreams.

How Steinbeck’s surrounding and the environment played a prominent role in the development of his literary career has been discussed in the introductory chapter. Steinbeck wrote about the suppressed people in most of his novels like Of Mice and Men (1937), The Grapes of Wrath (1939), and In Dubious Battle (1936). His reaction to the environment and his concern for the nature is visible in them. Steinbeck has the gift to communicate his inner thoughts to the average man and also educated them. He created his novels for building a kinder and more caring society. Steinbeck wrote novels only which had a strong first hand. He was contented with the stories that had real base. He wanted to bring self realization through his works. So his novels took place in California, the place where he lived, worked and knew them for sure. Many of his characters are real and they had been close with him in some way or other in his real life.

As stated in the statement of the problem, the characters in John Steinbeck’s novels possess the traits that enable them to endure life amidst difficulties. Steinbeck’s characters transform themselves into better human beings even when the external forces threaten their highly individualistic, nonconformist character. Tom Joad in The Grapes of Wrath (1939) emerges as a matured person leading a selfless life. Though Joads suffer incomparable losses they face all challenges without losing moral values. After granma’s
death the family is awestruck by the strength of Ma Joads’s love for the family. She intentionally does not take up the prominent role in the family. She carefully tries to retain the family members and performs an important function in passing on kindness and confidence into them. She wants the family to be whole and longs for their safety and togetherness. We watch Rose of Sharon transforming from a self centered girl to a woman of selfless love towards the end of the novel. She is caught in an image of comfort later confronting the suffering caused by her husband and still born child finds that sacrifice and kindness are greater values. The Joads prove to be stronger in their challenging circumstances and display honesty and honour emphasizing the significance of self respect in the long run.

In the US, the life of the workers has always provided a chance to give rise to writers during the Depression period. The situation gave the writers an opportunity to write about the issues that the workers had to achieve their dreams and hopes. The workers could not believe a safer future as the reality was so harsh. The writers pointed out the social ills in the country and the worse economical happenings that affected the migrants. The Great Depression was one of the important period in the US as it resulted in many disagreements. The shifting of the migrant workers towards the rural areas was also an important factor of destabilization. Because of the Industrial Revolution the number of industries came down and workers lost job. They had to work in the farms which became their only place to work. Therefore the workers moved to rural areas to fulfill their basic needs. The fictional
representation of the struggle of the migrants is so powerful and enticing in his novels.

Steinbeck depicts a clear struggle in *The Pearl* when Kino wants to gain material wealth with the help of the pearl. He was content in the beginning with his son and family before he gets the pearl. His avarice makes him to behave violently with Juana and also leads to Coyotito’s death. Finally when he is detached from the society he understands that pearl has brought him harm and throws the pearl back into the sea. The author takes us into the journey of George and Lennie which is filled with dreams, obstacles, fear and loneliness. *Tortilla Flat* celebrates the poor paisanos and makes us respect their simple life style. We can understand that the author’s concern is the liberation for all the oppressed working class and Jim’s death in *In Dubious Battle* is symbolical of this when the masses are victorious in their struggle.

All the five novels selected for the study have different social issues of the migrants, peasants and innocent people in general caught in the hands of avarice society. These five novels have different settings such as a poor community in Mexico, a worker’s bunkhouse, a box-car, a house in *Tortilla* and a farm. They have diverse main characters like a pearl diver, two drifters, peasants, friends and strikers. Despite of these different settings and characters they share the three common themes throughout the novel, namely, struggle for existence, group behavior and goodness. Suffering occupies a central place in John Steinbeck’s creative vision, for it is redemptive and the
only means to define humanity. The agony and sympathy he experiences around him turn inward for a solution to his misery in the form of his works. In this attempt, Steinbeck creates new values for himself, guided by the cardinal virtues of compassion, goodness, self-sacrifice, nobility of character and love for fellow beings. In sum, in the selected novels, Steinbeck gives expression to the honour of the human souls who search for moral values and goodness.

The powerful endings of Steinbeck’s novels show that Steinbeck and the characters are confident that sooner or later, a day will come when humanity will prevail over the malignity of the oppressive privileged few. It is a writer’s duty to write man’s greatness and spirit in defeated times. In Of Mice and Men George and Lennie possess these characteristics and succeed as humane. Steinbeck emphasizes that they make their dream special and different from other migrants. Steinbeck’s characters are people who live a normal life but remain strong and determined in all its way. Steinbeck brings them to life by portraying them with unerring mixtures of realism. Steinbeck also deviates from traditional naturalism by weaving humour into his stories. The homelessness and alcoholism that characterize the lives of the paisanos living on Tortilla Flat are classic representations of a world where nature has no concern for people. But Steinbeck chose to present these realities of the paisanos’ lives by telling through comic stories. He was always criticized for portraying the dark side of the realities of the US. He does this with subtle humour as he knew that humour goes well with the mysterious situations. He
expressed in his Nobel prize acceptance speech that he wrote for those who badly needed it. His books continued to be popular with readers, which was perhaps Steinbeck’s greatest defense against the critics. The characters and plotlines have been an inspiration for almost three generations including theatre troupes, playwrights and musicians. His depiction of time and place adds beauty and strength to his novels. His novels are beyond the stipulated time and place.

Steinbeck’s works are a kaleidoscope of the historical events during the nineties. His works had controversial ideas which portrayed only real truth of the working class. Though his novels were banned, his exceptional style enriched in unconventional style, symbolism, simplicity, colloquialisms, unique literary devices and effective imagery. The most effective symbol in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the land turtle which heads southwest. This turtle is identified with the Joads family and the moving people. The animal imagery is exhibited to tell the animal qualities in men and their reduction to the social forces. The Joads withstand both the natural and manmade environments. Characterization is the strong talent in his novels. We feel that we know the characters and that is his writing talent. He makes us to empathize with the characters. He describes the Salinas Valley and the shore with an aesthetic sense. However tragic the story is, he tells it along with the nature. He writes with his own experiences to write about their real struggle. Steinbeck’s protagonists are usually poor or working-class people who struggle but live on faith. His usage of simple language is a befitting one as it fits the storyline, setting and the characters.
The language is rich with colloquial words and expressions, which gives his characters their essential authenticity. This dissertation has not concentrated with his writing style or the history of the American literature but the common themes found in all the Steinbeck’s selected novels.

Steinbeck’s greatest contribution is his cultivating of optimism in us. However the situation is challenging, he trusts in man and his goodness. He keeps him high above on a platform and also spreads this optimism to his readers. He does not write for the sake of his works but he respects and loves his fellow beings. He lived with the migrants and those experiences provided him rich exposure. He too was in the poverty line and so his writings are for the protection of the masses. He believes that man has capacity to overcome all obstacles.

Steinbeck’s personal experiences on the workers gave birth to the story of the Joads family. Their journey to the California is a genuine portrayal and the most obvious example of group behavior. The Joads like all the other migrants cross hot deserts in the Depression period that was faced with economic collapse ruined virtues and unemployment. The family when loses its members still forms a group with its other migrants. The society does not accept those kind of people and they had to do it among themselves. This gives rise to the emergence of characters like Jim Casy and Tom Joad. These characters support the common people fight for their rights and consider the
social needs. The turtle’s crossing of the road is just one example of Steinbeck that people should share their resources and think about their interests too.

Steinbeck declares that the life of people will improve only when they focus on the community around them rather than on the individual. He stresses that people need to stick together and help each other if they want to survive and prosper. Steinbeck saw men as a part of the larger socio-economic units but believed in their major contribution society as a group. Steinbeck, as a socialist, believed in the interdependence of society and it is explored throughout the body of his works. Steinbeck writes on several themes like the aspects of dreams, the elements of loneliness, men’s cruelty towards the weak and social injustices towards the common people. Through these themes he explains what is humane and explores their nature. Steinbeck’s books ignite readers’ interests and concerns as he writes them with sincerity and pure motive. He depicts the tragic vision of the society but has belief that a writer should work to enhance the quality of life of the mankind.

The study has helped me to trace out the emergence of happiness beyond a materialistic concept and has enabled me to understand life in a different aspect in the process. It has helped me to analyze characters that have affirmed life amidst difficulties and study the human struggle in a different angle. Steinbeck had a global vision for humanity and even in the most frustrated moments had affirmation towards life as the characters are conscious about themselves. This thematic study has brought to forefront few
vital aspects that are common across people who strive to achieve a dream that is more altruistic than materialistic.