

HUMAN DIMENSION THROUGH POLITICAL ECOLOGY IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF JOHN STEINBECK

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Abstract- *Political Ecology is an interdisciplinary field that interconnects between environmental issues with Socio-economic and political systems. It highlights the inequalities connected to gender, race and class discrimination often deals with environmental policies. Political ecology examines people's relationship with environment to shape their identity and environmental movements. It emphasizes on the role of state policies, colonial legacies and local power dynamics offering uneven environmental justice. Pollution caused by factories affects the low-income community since they lack with political power to oppose. Political ecology analyses conflicts on natural resources, such as air, water, land and forest. As ecosystem collapse due to environmental pollution such as exploitation of natural resources, deforestation, burning of fossil fuels, increasing smoke from vehicles and chemical fertilizers, improper farming practices, impacts on emitting of Co2, causes green house effect on earth's atmosphere. This article explores environmental change to question the justice, power and resistance through political ecology. "Grapes of Wrath"(1939) and "Of Mice and Men" (1937) exploring environmental justice by focusing towards the importance of the land, labor and identity. Interdependence between human and ecosystem anticipating to environmental justice through the lens for understanding the ethical dimensions of human-nature relationship.*

Keywords: *Political Ecology, Environmental crisis, Inequality, Environment sustainability.*

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INTRODUCTION:

Political Ecology is a multidisciplinary field that examines the relationship between power, politics, society and how economic shape our environment. Emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, political ecology critiques of developmental studies and ecological anthropology. Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield emphasized that environmental degradation could not be explained without considering political and economic forces. Colonial administration often reorganized land and resource extraction for economies. Environmental issues like drought, forest fire are deeply rooted in social inequalities, government policies and global economic system. Land, forest, rivers are managed through laws, markets and force. It challenges the idea that humans are equally responsible for environmental damage. Environmental degradation disproportionately affect marginalized group. Marginalized communities often face the worst pollution, land loss and climate impacts like climate change. Political ecology studies how marginalized groups often based on race, class or gender bear the impacts of pollution and resource depletion.

Access to land, water and forest is often mediated by political authority and economic privilege. Political

ecology examines issues at multiple scales like community struggles, national state policies and global level like climate change and trade. Central to political ecology is that the ecological decision must be fair and inclusive. "Access to environmental resources is structured by political and economic hierarchies rather than natural limits" (Robbins 29). Movements for indigenous rights, anti-deforestation and climate justice embody this principle. Forest management extracts timber for railways and industry, displacing local communities.

In Chipko movement, women showed their opposition and protested from cutting trees. Political ecology how multinational corporations exploit mineral resources, often with state support, while local communities face displacement, pollution and violence. Industrialized nation contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, especially vulnerable population in Global South face climate impacts which led to demands for climate justice and reparation. In the era of "Anthropocene" political ecology is more relevant in the face climate crisis. It focuses on how resource distribution, land use and ecological degradation are influenced by power relations. It explores how states, corporations and local

communities can access to resources. By examining how power and inequality shape environmental outcomes, political ecology provides a framework for understanding both local struggles over resource and global debates on climate change.

Sustainable approaches through political ecology on local communities are given rights to, manage forests, fisheries and water systems. Environmental justice movements supports grassroots movement that resist exploitative projects like mining and dams. Shifting power from central government to local institutions allow for more conservation. This encourages to respect cultural practices and ecological knowledge. Political ecology integrates indigenous ecological practices like rotational farming, sacred groves, water harvesting. Climate justice framework advocates for policies that promotes sustainable adaptation strategies for vulnerable communities.

Migrant Struggle and Social Inequality in “Grapes of Wrath” (1939) !

Grapes of Wrath (1939) is set in Oklahoma California, American southwest. In the month of may a drought damages the cornfield of Oklahoma a bleak depiction of natural destruction. Extreme drought and improper farming practices have transformed fertile agricultural farm land into desolate wasteland, with relentless dust storms choking everything. The severe environmental degradation of the dust bowl and the subsequent forced migration of the “Okies” forms the eventual framework of transformation. Nature reflects a history of capitalist and environmental justice begin with poor tenant farmers bearing the cost of environmental collapse. The novel opening scene describe “the red country” turning “gray” and the relentless dust storms. This sets the stage for the environmental determinism. The widespread environmental trauma initiates the forced displacement and profound sense of loss that defines the Joad’s journey. Journey to west underscores precarity and resource scarcity. As the land’s fertility depletes, soon Oklahoma is engulfed in a storm that ruins the crop and fields. The eviction of farmers reveals environmental injustice as violence. Environmental collapse creates exploitation. Tom Joad, a protagonist has been released from McAlester Prison for serving four-year sentenced for homicide. Tom was in a idea to meet up his father’s forty-acre crop which has got ruined by the dust storms and drought. Tom discovers that the Joad farm has been abandoned.

The broken land mirrors a broken social system where mobility exist for the state but not for displaced

farmers. While returning back to his home , Tom meets Jim Casey who has faith in spiritual and holiness on believing all people as one soul. Casy believes holiness exists in people rather than god alone. Jim Casey joins them, hoping to understand the people better. The family sells possessions and plan their journey as California becomes the dream of survival. Tom represents the ordinary working man, while Casy becomes a moral guide. Muley Graves, neighbour of Tom who was forced for displacement by the land owners. Muley Graves explains that banks have taken the land and forced families by using tractors tearing off the land. But Muley Graves refuse to leave the land and lives like a ghost. Muley’s decision highlights the deep bond between a farmer and his land. His attachment to land emphasizes environmental justice as cultural survival. His inability to leave the place is testament to the identity and sense of belonging to a environment. Demonstrating the forced separation from one’s place. Exploring mechanization and capitalism destroy human connection to the land. Banks are portrayed as powerful monsters that demand profit. Even the men who evict farmers have no control over the system. This shows the inhuman economic system. Joad family prepare to migrate to California highlights unequal access to adaptation strategies. Political ecology frames migration a response to environmental mismanagement tied to power. California’s agricultural wealth is built on exploited labor. Landowners deliberately keep wages low. Justice is absent in land ownership and migrants are trapped in poverty. Food is destroyed to maintain prices while people starve. This injustice represents rising collective rage and moral outrage. Grandpa refuses to leave the land that defines his identity, dies on shortly after the family’s departure. His literal rootedness to the land is evident in his refusal to leave Oklahoma. His death reminds upon being forced off his land is deeply symbolic. He cannot survive being uprooted, like a plant torn from its soil. The family shares memories of the past. Families abandon their possession because they cannot carry everything. The emotional attachment to the household items are linked to the generation on the land and abandoning material representation of their lives and connection to the place.

The objects hold memories and identity and their forced sale is a stripping away of the self identity and memories. Objects once treasured lose their value symbolizing the loss of history, identity and personal dignity caused by forced migration. Joad begin their journey west. Abandoned farms decay and nature slowly reclaims the land. Dilapidated cars and trucks,

loaded with some meager possession reached the Highway route no 66. Joad along with thousands of "Okies" embark on perilous journey on Route 66, the mother road. Route 66 is described as the highway of migration, the mother road crowded with migrant families. Water is scarce, food is minimal and their worn-out truck breakdown here and there. The road itself becomes the symbol of collective human struggle against environmental forces. The migrants are described almost as an environmental crisis. The harshness of the journey reinforces their vulnerability to external elements. The detailed description of the land's turtle arduous journey across the highway, trying to avoid being crushed. Turtles struggle against cars reflects communities navigating through economic and environmental systems. It suggest that inherent resilience with nature. Families travel together, sharing their experiences.

The road becomes the symbol of collective movement and shared suffering. The Joads face mechanical problems and food shortages. They help other migrant families showing cooperation. At roadside diners the truck drivers are treated poorly while migrants struggle to afford food. The roadside camps and the emergence of a new communal identity among the migrants explores the social gathering. Despite the environmental desolation and loss of their individual places a new form of ecological community emerges. They learn to share and cooperate, recognizing that survival depends on collective action. This is a powerful adaptive response showing how disconnection from one environment can lead to the formation of new human ecosystem. The bountiful land of California being abused, leading to social and economic injustice. This contrast the natural dust bowl with human-created dust bowl of social inequality both causing immense suffering, made small acts of kindness occur despite hardship. The entire community of the east Oklahoma headed towards westward in order to find better job and settle down in west California. On reaching California, promised land shatter their dream. The migrants were treated like a slave by the land owners.

The description of the tractors and "cat" companies violently tearing up the land, dispossessing tenant farmers. The land is no longer nurtured but exploited for profit. The tractor driven are the part of the monsters, dehumanized by their complexity in the destruction. The tenant farmers are profoundly rooted in the land, having worked in it for generation and generation. Their dispossession is not just economic, it is a severing of identity, leading to trauma and rage. While staying in "Hooverville", Tom unleashes his righteous anger when he strikes the cop to defend Floyd. Hooverville is an filthy camps where migrants

live in fear. Hoovervilles show political injustice, the contrast between the promised fruitful land and the reality of the squalor hunger creates disillusionment. The environment here is not natural but human constructed social hierarchy. The migrants are treated as less than human. They undergone hunger, hostility and violence. Reality of California shatters their dream. Upon arriving in California, they face desperate poverty, overwhelming competition for scarce jobs, exploitation by landowners and virulent discrimination. Migrant camps develop systems of self governance.

Food is destroyed by burning the ripened fruit instead of offering it to the starving people by wealthy landowners shows ruthless action and injustice. In a workers strike Tom started arguing with the police and warned off destroying Hooverville. Weedpatch camp organized by migrants themselves with government support, represents a brief period of ecological harmony social dignity. The government camp demonstrates environmental justice appears through democratic control of resources. Steinbeck suggest justice requires structural change not charity. The clean conditions, community self-governance and a sense of belonging provides immense relief and foster a sense of individual and collective well-being. It demonstrate that when human create an environment that respect both nature and human dignity flourishing is possible. The ironic abundance of fruit rotting in California while people starve is a powerful symbol of ecological imbalance and human moral failure. The land could provide for everyone, but a flawed and economic system prevents access to its bounty, leading to suffering for harmonious human-nature interaction is thwarted by human greed. A government run camp gave more care to the to the Joad's family. Tom come to know about the brutal action of police in the camp. As they cannot stay in the government camp for long time they have to move on with their agony and burdens carrying all the way . Tom's transformation, is influenced by Casey's philosophy. He moves from an individualistic to understanding of the interconnectedness of all people and their collective struggle against an oppressive system.

This realization of the "Oversoul" is a form of ecological consciousness, recognizing that human well being and natural community. Jim Casey is killed by a strikebreaker. Tom Joad in a fit of rage kills Casey's assailant and hide himself. Inorder to carry on Casey's legacy Tom decides to fight for the social justice for the whole community. There were no jobs for three months. The final flood, another natural disaster, forces the ultimate test of human resilience and collective spirit. In the barn the space of human-

animal connection, the primal act of Rose of Sharon breastfeeding a dying man transcends individual family boundaries. This act of profound compassion, born out of extreme environmental hardship and shared vulnerability, symbolizes ultimate interconnectedness of all life. This action speaks to the enduring human capacity for empathy and survival even in the face of utter devastation. "Industrial farming as a system that prioritizes profit over ecological imbalance" (Steinbeck 41). Steinbeck ultimately argues that survival, dignity and ecology are inseparable. Californians agribusiness wealth depends on migrant labor exploitation. Environmental injustice is institutionalized through policing and land control.

Ecology of Broken Dreams and Environmental Injustice in "Of Mice and Men" (1937)

John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" (1937) is set in Soledad California, Steinbeck begins the story by placing two main characters displaced migrants from ranch. Two men arrive at green pool off the Salinas River. The river and brush are free but the land is not accessible due to social structures. "Land as a symbol of independence that remains inaccessible to migrant workers" (Steinbeck 60). They are the migrant and displaced ranch workers during Great Depression. They have no stable land. The access to land is unequal wealthy landowners control resources while laborers move constantly. Their dream represents longing for environmental determination control over food, shelter and livelihood. The Great Depression and Dust Bowl created economic systems that pushed workers into migration.

The land is not shared it is owned. The river bank symbolizes common land excluded from formal property systems. George is thin, small in physical appearance while his friend Lennie, is a height man with child's mind who moves like a hulking bear. He has an intellectual disability and a dangerous obsession with touching soft things. Lennie drank the water from pool and tells that water is contaminated. George explains that they have to walk on for four miles. George insists on their journey to ranch. Lennie started worrying after hearing of how they were secured from work cards. George questioned Lennie about what he was having in his pocket. Lennie says George that he had a dead mouse in his pocket. George threw the dead mouse into the brush asking why would hang on to such a thing. George advised Lennie to be quiet until reaching ranch and meet their boss. The duo arrives at, a ranch near Soledad. The ranch represents a hierarchical labor system while the boss family lives

separately with access to resources and comfort.

Land is productive space controlled by elites. The capitalist agricultural system produces rootless laborers. The ranch is control production system George goes over the plain with Lennie. George said to Lennie that they will stay together by the side of the river. On knowing the hard work on the ranch they kept spending the night happily. George asked Lennie in order to handover the dead mouse and tosses the mouse into the brush. Lennie tells if they had rabbits, he will keep it alive. George remembers that they were chucked out of the weed. George begins to describe the lonely lives of wandering ranch. George continues to say about a story of himself by saving money to buy livestock. Lennie enjoys the fruit of their own land and company of some animals. As soon as they arrive at ranch a man called Candy guides them for lodgings. The Bunkhouse where all laborers stay had straw beds is the place where ranch workers live in poor, crowded conditions and lack of control over environment. The ranch is a site of capitalist agricultural production and land owners belong to the boss. Workers are tied to the field but have no claim to land or resources.

George spots poisonous yellow insects and lice on the bed. Candy's saving reflect aging labor's fear of ecological displacement. Ownership of land equals freedom from exploitation. Agricultural capitalism prevents workers from achieving ecological independence. Crooks is isolated because he is black, talks with Lennie about dreams and discrimination. Crooks is denied participation in land ownership is due to racial hierarchy and physically segregated in the barn. Crooks room apart from other workers restrict his access to communal spaces and resources. White supremacy structures access to social and physical space. The barn symbolizes how capitalism confines and both animals and socially marginalized humans. George asks more about the boss to Candy. Men with high heels enters the bunkhouse and ordered to start doing the work after the dinner with Slim's team. He's none other than the boss. He enquired about two men their delay to ranch earlier. A man with curly hair named Curley, is the son of boss who picks fights with bigger men like Lennie. Curley's wife is also marginalized, as a woman, she has no land and no work. Carlson another ranch hand offers a puppy to Candy. Lennie's mental disability leaves him vulnerable. Lennie accidentally kills his puppy in the barn as well as break the neck of Curley's wife. Lennie's killing of Candy's dog emphasizes the vulnerability to social status. The dog once useful is discarded paralleling how society are deemed to be no

longer productive. Lennie's act portrays injustice permeates human and nonhuman life. Lennie flees to a pool as the men at the ranch discover what was happened. George killed his friend by shooting at the back of the neck. George had killed his friend out of mercy. Lennie's death restores order and the system continue to be unchanged. The ranch survives and the workers remain trapped. Lennie's inability to gauge his own strength mirrors the human impact on the environment.

Conclusion

Steinbeck's *"Grapes of Wrath"* (1939) represents a profound critique of environmental injustice through political ecology, reveals how ecological disaster Dust Bowl creates a destruction among migrant families for forceful displacement towards the westward, economic systems, Political powers plays crucial role in desperate poverty, exploitation and discrimination. Steinbeck does not portray the Dust Bowl merely as a natural catastrophe but he exposes it as an environmental crisis shaped by capitalist agriculture and exploitative banking systems. Environmental degradation becomes inseparable from class oppression. The mechanization of farming, the displacement of tenant farmers and the consolidation of land ownership explores how powerful institution like banks and large owners control access to natural resources. The tractors replacing families symbolizes a system that values profit over people, transforming land from a lived environment into an economic commodity. Environmental degradation disproportionately affect the poor. The Joad family and other migrantworkers suffer from hunger, social exclusion, homelessness, while landowners and corporate remains insulated from these consequences. Steinbeck portrays the migrants as victims of the system that strips them of from both land and dignity. Camps, roadside settlements and labor exploitation demonstrates marginalized communities bear the cost of environmental and economic injustice. Through the personal transformation of Tom Joad emerges solidarity and social gathering. The novel ends with the image of human compassion and shared survival.

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Rose of Sharon act of serving breast milk to a starving men even in the face of utter devastation portrays empathy towards human well being. "Environmental sustainability is impossible without economic justice" (Steinbeck 317). In *"Of Mice and Men"* emerges as a powerful critique of structural inequality embedded within environmental and economic systems. Steinbeck portrays the natural landscape of California undergoes social inequality. Migrant workers like George and Lennie are displaced and they have no secure access to land, resources or stability. Through political ecology power and economic structures controls the land and forced to labor on it without ownership. Steinbeck ultimately shows that the American Dream of land ownership and independence is unattainable for labors who trapped in systems of economic exploitation and environmental dispossession.

The dream farm represents environmental justice, a place of self sufficiency, dignity and control over one's surroundings. Its destruction symbolizes hoe structural inequality prevents marginalized individuals from accessing land, security and opportunity. Environment, power and injustice intersect, making survival itself a struggle for those at the margins of society. The ranch workers lives are shaped by the systems of power that control land, labor and access to natural resources. George and Lennie were left dispossessed, constantly moving in search of survival. Steinbeck powerfully portrays the migrant laborers, women like Curley's wife, elderly workers like Candy and Black workers like Crooks are excluded from equal access to social, economic and environmental resources.

The ranch becomes the space for environmental inequality, where space, opportunity and dignity are unequally distributed. Both the novels expose environmental conditions are never neutral instead shaped by political and economic systems that privilege the elites and while marginalizing the poor. By exposing these interconnected systems of exploitation, Steinbeck urges need for social and environmental transformation.