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A Feminist Reading of *East of Eden* By John Steinbeck

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ABSTRACT. *East of Eden* one of the most controversial works by John Steinbeck since its publication up to now has been receptive to many critical discourses in almost all of the critical approaches. One of the most important reasons to this critical reception is its wide circle of themes and symbolic nature. Having created a world full of universal values, Steinbeck succeeded to challenge many of these values. This paper tries to examine *East of Eden* with regard to feminist approach. By an over view of the main female characters in the novel especially Cathy Ames as devil incarnate and also the relationship between male and female characters, this paper intends to go through the issue much more deeply and find the dominant viewpoint dominating the whole atmosphere of the novel toward the expected role of women in society and family.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Certainly studying *East of Eden* regardless to the cultural and historical context of the novel's publication date because of the many direct and indirect hints to the main issues of its time is not a all-inclusive study, as Luche Li points out:” Through his work of fiction and nonfiction, Steinbeck has offered us a broad range of views with which we can reflect on American ethics.” (63) Even with the intrigue was applied by Steinbeck, placing the time of the story in the past, one can clearly see traces of the day's events in the novel. 1950s, the decade of the publication of the novel was full of determining trends and events.

After the devastating physical and psychological effects of World War I and II and during the growing fear of Cold War people seek calmness more and more. According to Danielle Woods :”In reaction to the constant fear caused by the Cold War, many Americans attempted to create a safe environment of their own by having a stable family life. Once World War II ended, American men and women were eager to marry. (3)”. In this heaven of tranquility again after industrialization of American society and painful experiences of world wars, men and women returned to their traditional roles. In American industrial society since 1880s and during World War I and II due to growing needs of economic markets women were an integral part of the labor market. But after world wars by some unwritten laws the role of women in society and family was redefined. In this redefined model, ideal woman was depicted as a domestic wife who devoted herself completely to the family. As Estelle B. Freedman mentions:”The ideology of “true womanhood” was so deeply ingrained and so useful for preserving social stability in a time of flux that those few women who explicitly rejected its inequalities could find little support for their views.”(25)

The main purpose of women in such a society was marriage and after that giving births to children, the more the better. In such a society with much deeper religious beliefs as compared to the time of war especially between female populations, having a large family was a virtue and a source of comfort. As Luce Irigaray in her article “*The bodily encounter with the mother*” remarks:

“The maternal function underpins the social order and the order of desire, but it is always kept in a dimension of need. Where desire is concerned, especially in its religious dimension, the role of maternal--feminine power is often nullified in the

satisfying of individual and collective needs. Desire for her, her desire, that is what is forbidden by the law of the father, of all fathers: fathers of families, fathers of nations, religious fathers, professor--fathers, doctor--fathers, lover--fathers, etc".(414)

In fact in post-war society having more children meant a brighter future. Women in this defined social model just as mother or wife were identified. Those women who wanted to be independent and chose to work often were seen as incompetent wife and mother. Such a view of the position of women was also repeatedly emphasized in the media as the most effective means of shaping the public opinion in this time.

With respect to this condition, Women's movements in 1960s that were known as Second-wave feminism in the United States seem not too far-fetched. This time was very sensitive and determinant in the implementation of the feminist main principles that its roots lied in the main attitudes in patriarchal society in the past. According to *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*:

“On the political front, the sixties were a radical period. Many women were active in socialist movements but found that their claims were openly disregarded and that they were washing the dishes while their male colleagues were discussing radical politics. Being pressurised to return to a type of femininity, which serviced male interests, after they had held responsible positions during the war and feeling disappointed by leftist politics, women felt that they had to join forces. As an attempt to counteract age-old strategies of silencing female interests, women’s groups began to spring up in the sixties and seventies.”(197)

2. *EAST OF EDEN*: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

In *East of Eden* the life of two families the Trasks and the Hamiltons with regard to changes in time is depicted. The novel set in Salinas Valley, California. In this realistic portrait of American society throughout the novel the reader can perceive the main social and cultural values of time. In this novel three women with contradictory characteristics are depicted: Cathy Ames (Kate), Liza Hamilton, and Abra Bacon. Due to the properties of these women, they can be considered as three different stratum of women in society. Liza Hamilton represents a domestic wife, a traditional woman with some strict religious beliefs who devotes herself completely to her family as a good wife and mother. Liza Hamilton in many respects is in sharp contrast to Cathy Ames who represent floozy woman without even one good feature, by this contrast the author intensifies the characteristics of these two women. In the meantime, the writer puts the character of Abra Bacon in front of the reader, a kind of moderate character who is neither so-traditional nor so in contrast to the norms of society.

Cathy Ames the main cause of tortures of the Trasks is a carefree beautiful woman who just sees herself and her desires even when she becomes mother. The complexities of this character lay in her nonconformity and moving unlike the natural path of femininity: As a wife she doesn't care about her husband's emotions and as a mother she doesn't have any feeling to her newborn children. The main focus is on her beauty and actually on her body. Her body is depicted as her lethal weapon that she uses it in a completely unconventional way, contrary to traditional expectations of female body. Susan Bordo remarks:” Our conscious politics, social commitments, strivings for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our bodies-not the craving, instinctual body imagined by Plato, Augustine, and Freud,' but what Foucault calls the "docile body," regulated by the norms of cultural life.”(2362) (STEINBECK) the focus on the body and womanish beauty and charm starts from the description of Kate's beauty:

“Cathy had from the first a face of innocence. Her hair was gold and lovely; wide-set hazel eyes with upper lids that drooped made her looks mysteriously sleepy. Her nose was delicate and thin, and her cheekbones high and wide, sweeping down to a small chin so that her face was heart-shaped. Her mouth was well shaped and well lipped but abnormally small—what used to be called a rosebud. Her ears were very little, without lobes, and they pressed so close to her head that even with her hair combed up they made no silhouette. They were thin flaps sealed against her head. Cathy always had a child’s figure even after she was grown, slender, delicate arms and hands tiny hands. Her breasts never developed very much. Before her puberty the nipples turned inward. Her mother had to manipulate them out when they became painful in Cathy’s tenth year. Her body was a boy’s body, narrow-hipped, straight-legged, but her ankles were thin and straight without being slender. Her feet were small and round and stubby, with fat insteps almost like little hoofs. She was a pretty child and she became a pretty woman. Her voice was huskily soft, and it could be so sweet as to be irresistible. But there must have been some steel cord in her throat, for Cathy’s voice could cut like a file when she wished. Even as a child she had some quality that made people look at her, then look away, then look back at her, troubled at something foreign. Something looked out of her eyes, and was never there when one looked again. She moved quietly and talked little, but she could enter no room without causing everyone to turn toward her.”(58).

This long passage in describing Kate’s physical appearance indicates at least two points: first the importance of her feminine beauty in understanding her personality and her identity as an evil character and second by referring to his childish and even “boyish” beauty the author wants mention to the contradictory aspects in her personality, Kate with his innocent childish beauty often deceive gullible men like Adam. In fact with the use of this body Kate gains whatever she wants. The very important fact in this regard is that all of the men around Kate include Adam who claims deeply loves Kate just want gain access to her beauty and it seems don’t care about her personality as a human, when the writer wants to portraits the repulsive image of Kate at the time of her encounter with Adam in the brothel he writes: “Adam looked down at her hand and saw it wrinkled as a pale monkey’s paw. He moved away in revulsion.”(247), as it is clear just with seeing her ugly appearance Adam disillusioned from the ideal picture that he made in his mind of Kate and not her terrible deeds like shooting Adam or abandoning newborn children.

In the horrible image of woman’s body that Steinbeck offers sex and its aftermath has decisive role. In this image Kate with the use of her high sexual potency presents the dark and perilous side of femininity. In contrast to normal women in view point of author like Liza Hamilton, Kate doesn’t use her own strong sexual potency in a right way that is giving birth to children. On the other hand it seems that Kate doesn’t enjoy of her sexual affairs because she doesn’t like men at all, what is really pleasurable for her is a sense of humility that she sees in men. Danielle Woods in this regard believes: “Unlike other brothels that exist to satisfy men in exchange for cash, Kate uses her house as a means to obtain the power to ruthlessly destroy the lives of numerous men.”(17). When Kate tries to show Adam the photographs of men who have been extorted by her, she says:

“Look there. That’s a state senator. He thinks he’s going to run for Congress. Look at his fat stomach. He’s got bubs like a woman. He likes whips. That streak there that’s a whip mark. Look at the expression on his face! He’s got a wife and four kids and he’s going to run for Congress. You don’t believe! Look at this! This piece of white blubber is a councilman; this big red Swede has a ranch out near Blanco. Look here! This is a professor at Berkeley. Comes all the way down here to have the toilet splashed in his face—professor of philosophy. And look at

this! This is a minister of the Gospel, a little brother of Jesus. He used to burn a house down to get what he wanted.”(246)

Behind this sense of humiliation, Kate’s sense of dominance over her baits hides. The main reason of this sense is an unreasonable anger of men that has led to a kind of revenge.

Many questions about Kate’s personality at the end of novel have been leaved unanswered: what is Kate’s motivation for all of these mischievous deeds? What is the main source of her anger of men? Why does she abandon her children without any maternal feeling or even compassion? Why does such a cold hearted mother in meeting with her son after many years suddenly change and decide to leave her wealth for him? And the most important question what is the main reason of author of creating such a monster in a figure of beautiful woman? Kate kills her parents, shoots Adam, deserts her sons, works as a prostitute, poisons Faye and blackmails her clients, behind all of these criminal actions must be a very strong motive, a very significant driving force but Kate neither explicitly nor implicitly doesn’t point out her main motivation or it better to say her main desires.

The other means of author to depict a horrifying image of Kate is contrast. As mentioned above Kate in several aspects is in sharp contrast with Liza Hamilton who is a traditional woman and in complete accordance to the idealistic picture of perfect woman. The image that writer shapes of “Angelic woman” contrary to “demonic woman” recalls the distinction between gender and sex that feminist critics repeatedly have pointed out, sex is a matter of biology while gender refers to social and cultural construction, an imposed concept that its main function is classification and categorization. In this systematic categorization in each historical period according to the needs of patriarchal society the main factors of perfect feminine identity has been defined. According to this changeable definition women who are conform to this defined elements are “perfect women” and those who are not are “improper women” that don’t have any position in such a society. In this novel Liza Hamilton is an embodiment of perfect woman or angelic woman versus Cathy Ames as incarnation of diabolic woman. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber in their widely received article “*The Madwoman in the Attic*” remark:

“... the monster- woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author’s power to alley “his” anxieties by calling their source bad names(witch, bitch, fiend, monster) and simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained “place “ and thus generates a story that “gets away” from its author.”(156)

Liza Hamilton unlike Kate is completely dependent woman despite her active presence in her family. She is constantly pregnant, this condition make a prison for her that Simon de Beauvoir defines as the strong restriction of maternal duties that limits women to home environment while men out of these duties have the opportunity to transcend their educational and intellectual status. In this novel Samuel Hamilton, Liza’s husband, is man of intellect while the only book that Liza reads is Bible. In this regard Liza not only dedicates her life to household chores and reproduction duties but also expect other women treat exactly in this way that is why she doesn’t live Kate, in fact she realizes Kate as an indolent and inutile woman who doesn’t use of her hands in sewing, mending, or knitting .

It seems that much of conventional behaviors of Liza stem from her religious beliefs, according to these religious doctrines a perfect woman is someone who eagerly devoted herself to her family and also a completely incontrovertible obedient woman. By describing the appearance and a little bit her personality the author clearly shows this religious viewpoint to life:

“She wore her hair always pulled tight back and bunned behind in a hard knot. And since I can’t remember how she dressed, it must have been that she wore clothes that matched herself exactly. She had no spark of humor and only occasionally a blade of cutting wit. She frightened her grandchildren because she had no weakness. She suffered bravely and uncomplainingly through life, convinced that that was the way her God wanted everyone to live. She felt that rewards came later.”(14)

In this description we see a very rigid woman that nothing can change her rigorous religious beliefs even deep calamities like losing a child, in her view all of these disasters are will of God and the duties of faithful servants are patience and obedience. In such a mental framework woman is a subordinate creature whose main function is breeding. Moreover it seems that Liza among her heavy domestic duties forget her femininity and actually her feminine identity, she is just depicted as a good mother and competent wife and not as a feminine figure.

Another contrasting force in the novel to highlighting the evil characteristics of Kate is Adam Trask, a calm and kind man who seemingly loves Kate with all of his heart so that after her desert for a very long time he remains in a deep shock and its aftermath. With portraying such a lovely man the writer exaggerates dreadful deeds of Kate:

“Young Adam was always an obedient child. Something in him shrank from violence, from contention, from the silent shrieking tensions that can rip at a house. He contributed to the quiet he wished for by offering no violence, no contention, and to do this he had to retire into secretness, since there is some violence in everyone. He covered his life with a veil of vagueness, while behind his quiet eyes a rich full life went on. This did not protect him from assault but it allowed him an immunity.”(21).

In this unrealistic image, the superior and angelic soul of Adam depicts in sharp contrast to inferior and demonic soul of Kate. With the regard to the significant of the name “Adam” that is the allusion to the Genesis story, we can consider Adam as another “Adam” who deceived by “Eve” that led to their fall from heaven. This allusion due to the names of twin boys “Aron” and “Cain” intensifies. Indeed Kate in this novel is another Eve that with her virulent nature causes Adam’s fall. This Eve like that blameworthy Eve not only destroys the life of her husband but also ruins the life of her children and everyone around her.

Abra Bacon at first glance seems writers’ alternative woman far from conventional Liza and unconventional Cathy, indeed far from black and white view of the writer to women characters but with close examination we perceive this character as the other stereotypical women that are depicted by male authors. She is representative of new generation of women who want to prove their potentials far away the traditional expectation of feminine identity in a male dominated society: “Her hazel eyes were sharp and intelligent and completely fearless. She looked straight into the faces of the boys, straight into their eyes, one after the other, and there was no hint of the shyness she had pretended inside the house.”(264), in this image of Abra a kind of dichotomy is evident: the image that Abra shows of herself in her house that certainly is a shy and unassertive girl to gain her parents’ consent and the other is an image of a bold and impudent girl, indeed her real personality. This dualism recalls Cathy’s dichotomy before she becomes a prostitute, pretending to be an obedient and timid girl who wants gain the consent of people and actually deceive them. On other hand we can see a strict passive traditional view toward life in Abra’s characterization that is completely contrary to first description of her as a defiant girl in the novel: she severally mentions in the novel that she wants to be Aron’s wife, it is the only picture that she has in her mind for her future. In this picture she even ready to accept the role of traditional woman to get married with

Aron. Besides Abra acquiesces to the image that Aron wants to make of her, in Aron's request of her to pretending to be his mother she passively accept the role of the mother figure in the hope of attracting the love and attention of Aron. Abra's final absorption to Cal is also is questionable and contrary to her deep love for Aron especially due to the fact that Abra is the first one who confesses her love to Cal, the same declaration that occurred in the past toward Aron. This confession portrays an untrustworthy image of Abra rather than daring and unconventional girl.

3. CONCLUSION

Stereotypical view to women and their desires, needs, feelings, internal and external conflicts, psychological states, and feminine identity by male authors who just see and perceive these feminine states from the outside and through a rigorous critical and reproachful patriarchal lens is presented again in this novel with portraying three representatives of three types of women. Each of these three women in a way lost their true feminine identity that can be considered as a product of writer's wrong view toward women and his false depiction of women.

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