

Gender Inequality in John Steinbeck's "*Of Mice and Men*"

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Abstract

The difference between male and female is very real and strongly rooted in human nature and physiology. In the olden days, people were not treated equally on the basis of their gender which was considered a social issue. Some differences in genetics, psychology, or social culture may cause this treatment. Even in the current politics when we come across the globe lead, women are the one who suffers loss when we compare to men. Gender inequality leads a major role in women including education, life, expectancy, personality, interest, family, occupation, and health. In many areas, they have shown that gender perceives things differently like education and political allegiance. Different cultures have different ways of dealing with gender inequality, which also has an impact on non-binary people.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Loneliness, Feminism, Marriage, discrimination

Contribution/Originality: The main purpose of the paper is to inform the reader about the issues related to gender inequality during the Great Depression, with a special reference to Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. It analyses how females and males are portrayed in *Of Mice and Men*. Hence, through analysing them, one can discover the status of women and men in the 19th century.

Introduction

Gender is a socio-cultural term referring to socially defined roles and behaviours assigned to "males" and "females" in a given society, whereas the term "sex" is a biological and physiological exception that distinguishes men and women. In its social, historical, and cultural aspects, gender is a function of power relationships between men and women, where men are

considered superior to women. Gender is considered a man-made process and a natural function of human beings. Gender inequality is described as discrimination against women based on their sex and women are considered as the weaker sex. She has been submitting herself to men. She is utilized, degraded, violated, and discriminated against both in our homes and in the outside world. . According to the Biblical view of mankind, we are told that "God created man in His image; in the image of God, He created him, male and female." Man entered the world first after which women entered and even in the Scripture God told that women submit to their husbands but not in a dominant way. In Aristotle's book *Politics* (350 B.C.), he says that "the male is by nature superior and the female inferior." When we see society, men have dominance over children, wife, and property. The English Encyclopaedia says, "Gender inequality is the difference in the status, power, and prestige that women and men have in groups, communities, and societies". So it indicates both man and woman.

The novel portrays the life of two migrant workers who move to California in search of new opportunities during the Great Depression. Through this novel, he explores women who have also been treated with inequality in society. Simone De Beauvoir explored the distinction in her book "The Second Sex" (1949). She was well-known for her statement that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (De Beauvoir 1972, p 295) this quotes how the different gender in the hierarchy opposition. The author of *Of Mice and Men* depicts them as men's caregivers. Sexism has been an issue throughout history. In this novel, we can see that many characters seem to be lonely, especially the female character. According to Ann Oakley (1972), the purpose of the distinction between sex and gender was very crucial. When a boy baby is born, the patriarchal family is happy and welcomes him, but when a girl baby is born, they are unhappy. People give more importance to their male characters, even if they see films or read novels. The author gives more importance to the male character, like a hero. Inequality affects women even while they are learning and working.

There is a general saying that women should study less than their husbands because if they did better in school, they would disrespect them. They never realise that if women study it would lead to the growth of their families and society. Though it has changed in the past few years, it

still exists in some places. Women are expected to be passive, friendly, emotional, and warm but the same society expects men to be dominant, assertive, self-centered, and ambitious. This paper helps us to understand the depiction of feminine issues in the novel and to study American women's instability and struggle in accordance with the social, historical, cultural, and religious atmosphere of American society. It investigates how a female character represents herself in the context of 19th-century gender roles.

Review of Literature

Emery (1992) has attempted to explain *Of Mice and Men* which she concluded that Steinbeck is expressed that a "chronicle of America's social inequities". In this paper, *Of Mice and Men* was pretended that gives the essential injustice to society. She also examines the relationship between George and Lennie, which was considered an affectionate marriage.

Rich & Ruby (1994) writes that *Of Mice and Men* has become a classic in our culture and one characteristic of dramatic classics is that they contain characters who invite endless new portrayals, characters who present challenges for each new generation of actors. What else accounts for the numerous film versions of Hamlet, just in our generation? And while I don't mean to suggest any analogy between Curley's wife and Hamlet, they both embody puzzles for their interpreters. Steinbeck understood the sexual objectification of this character and her limitations in a masculine society.

Gladstein (2002), "Foote's ingression of the contemporary issue of wife-abuse" in the 1992 film *Of Mice and Men* "gives a further indication of the impact of the time of production on how Curley's wife is portrayed." This is achieved in one of the rare situations in which Foote alters Steinbeck's story by including a scenario that amplifies the idea of this woman as a victim who has been more wronged than wronged.

Momanyi (2007) has examined the Waswahili literature that supports the patriarchal Symbolic Order. She claims that the novel is "designed to maintain sexuality as binary opposition" and that certain vocabulary has been employed. The ranch employees in *Of Mice and Men* perceive Curley's wife as a sexual yearning.

Ansari (2015), has also explained that "male-authored literature works in prejudice direction" and is characterized by a patriarchal framework for judging everything. John Steinbeck has received criticism primarily from the critic community for his use of sexist terminology or portrayal of women as tools in the hands of men. There is only one female character in *Of Mice and Men*, and there are some obvious signs of women, such as Suzzy's home, which doubles as a brothel where men used to get clean. To read of Curley's wife's passing in the book is heartbreaking.

Gender Inequality

Gender is defined as the social, cultural, and psychological differences between men and women. It expresses that men and women are not equal. According to Giddens (2001), "gender inequality refers to the difference in the status, power, and prestige enjoyed by women and men in various contexts." In the 1900s, women were accountable for the majority of domestic chores and childcare. They were splitting their time between work and caring for the home. The evidence shows that women who work outside the home often put in an extra 18 hours a week doing household or childcare-related chores as opposed to men, who spend an average of 12 hours a day in childcare activities. Later, women were given new roles in society, such as leaders in politics and church, and as CEOs. Still, we can find evidence of gender inequality in our society.

There are some issues related to inequality, such as poverty, lack of awareness, social attitudes, and less nutrition for girls. Some other major aspects of inequality between men and women in their families are marriage and dowry, harassment, and premarital external affairs. In some other cases, we can find gender inequality in many patriarchal families. When the women give birth to a male child they usually celebrate and feel happy, but when the girl baby is born, they are unwelcome. In general, men are thought to be stronger than women, which is why women are thought to be weaker; this is why both of them play different roles and are treated differently.

Gender inequality demonstrates to society the reality of how gender roles, and cultural, political, and religious beliefs are constructed. People in this society believed that women and men are not equal. They instilled in women the notion that women are emotional and sentimental, whereas men are strong and never cry in public. Only men can lead their families and their countries. Women have fewer rights than men because they are unable to make decisions. Women and children face numerous restrictions in many countries. In comparison to men, women have a smaller voice when it comes to issues concerning their politics and bodies. Women had no opportunity to study in the past, but as countries developed, the government implemented numerous programs to educate girl children. Many families have previously assumed that male children would study more than female.

In case of marriage, women should not study more than their husband because it is believed that a woman who learns more than her husband makes her own choice without listening to her husband. Gender inequality has decreased in recent years when compared to the past, but it remains widespread. Gender inequalities have been eliminated as a result of education and the advancement of society. This makes it simple to access opportunities without regard for gender. Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) reveals that women in the 1950s were only at home to perform their duties as housewives and mothers.

Gender Inequality in *Of Mice and Men*

After the Great Depression, life for women was becoming increasingly difficult because of poverty and discrimination. In 1920, when women got the right to vote, they thought in their minds that gender inequality had never ended. Steinbeck reveals that people have false expectations based on gender through the point of view of Curley's wife. In this novel, Steinbeck introduces only one female character, Curley's wife, even though he doesn't mention her name in the novel. Through her character, he describes how men treat women and how women lack importance in the life of men. A name indicates a person; but here it shows she is dependent on men. She is revealed as pretty, always appearing in full makeup and nice clothes. "She had full, rouged lips and wide-spread eyes, heavily made up. Her fingernails were red. Her hair hung in little rolled clusters, like sausages. She wore a cotton house dress and red mules, on the insteps of

which were little bouquets of red ostrich feathers.” She always expresses her sexuality, and she uses her looks to her advantage.

Anyhow, addressing her only as Curley’s wife strongly reveals that she is dependent on her husband. Her husband, Curley, is described as a rude man who always visits the bunkhouse searching for her. Curley is considered a cruel person in the novel. When we see in the beginning, Curley is a thin young man. He shows his masculinity by fighting with his labourers. Then he has the height and weight of his beautiful wife. He refuses to let her talk to another labourer. Steinbeck says that he is extremely possessive of her. He never allows her to talk to other workers who were working in the bunkhouse. He never gives her freedom. She always feels lonely; in contrast, she is also affected by abusive treatment for her confession to Lennie. At the end of the novel, she confesses she never likes Curley “I don’ like Curley. He ain’t a nice fella” (84).

At last, she marries Curley because he mistreats her. She seeks comfort. He was not ready to give attention to his wife. She wants to be independent, but her destination changes. She also fails in the role of wife because she never cares about her husband, at last, she finds Lennie. Lennie is impressed by her. He keeps calling her “she’s pure”. When she meets Lennie, she informs him that she wants a friend and wishes for someone who listens to her, but she never finds one. Till her death, she is dominated by her husband. When Lennie touches her hair, she acts mad and starts to scream. In this effort, he breaks her neck. She gets attention, but fails because Lennie killed her. It happens because of Curley, if he had given attention to his wife, Lennie, wouldn’t have killed her. It is simple for men to call women by names because they do not care about them. At the end of the novel Candy thinks she is a useless tramp: "You god damn tramp', he said viciously. 'You done it, di'nt you? I s'pose you're glad. Ever'body knew you mess things up. You wasn't no good. You ain't no good now, You lousy tart" (Steinbeck 95).

In the novel, they explore the fact that men thought it was the woman’s fault. In Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, Curley’s wife is portrayed as a non-idea. Candy informs her to go to homestay there because it becomes a problem for her and the labour, but she does not listen to him. She always makes a problem for males, especially those who do not like her. From the

author's point of view, she is considered Curley's wife and only wanted something from men. She never found her life to be happy. At last, her life ended too soon. Steinbeck compared Curley's wife to Eve in the Garden of Eden. Eve is eager to eat from the forbidden tree. She tempts Adam to eat the fruit, and at last, they get out of Eden. Eve's action causes sin to mankind. Similarly, Curley's wife is curious about Lennie. She understands he is stronger than her husband. So she invites him to touch her soft hair, but she does not realize the consequences. Curley's wife's action causes Lennie and George to lose their dream of a little farm.

Through this novel, we can see how they treat females as only being used for domestic activities. She can follow only her husband's wishes. When we see the character of the crook in the novel, an African American stable buck working on the ranch, Curley's wife always threatens him, always showing her power over him. We learn how the highly-ranked people treat the lower-class people through the treatment of the crooks, and because he is a man, he is treated because of his status. He also explains that he has restrictions on going to the bunkhouse where other accompanying men are staying because of his race. Actually, it's about the color of the skin, but still, he has a separate room next to the stables. Curley and his wife are treating him differently. Everyone at the ranch is living together, but he is living alone. The power and money of the boss made him stay away and treat him differently. They do not want to spend money on black people that is the reason they ask him to stay next to the animal shed. Segregation is one of the most serious issues in the society, and it persists:

S'pose you didn't have nobody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk house and play rummy 'cause you was black. How'd you like that? S'pose you had to sit out here an' read books. Sure you could play horseshoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody -to be near him." He whined, "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you (Steinbeck 71).

He shares his thoughts and feelings with Lennie, and he reveals that he has a dream to own the farm. However, Curley's wife insults his dream because she says to just think about his status and not dream about his farm. Because of his race, he doesn't get equal rights. Steinbeck

symbolises the character of the crooks; we can see that the crook's room has "a meagre yellow light," which represents that there is very little hope in Crooks' life. The author wants the reader to know that nobody cares for him. The character of crooks also comes under the category of gender inequality. Through the character of Crooks, Steinbeck points out how black people did not get any rights in 1920s America.

Conclusion

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* explores the reality that happened in the 19th century. We can see it as the Great Depression. Through this paper, the researcher has tried to explain how gender inequality has been used in *Of Mice and Men*. In his masterpiece, Steinbeck also analyses the conflicts, needs, and fears of poor illiterate white women, who are marked by the most dreadful losses that a woman can suffer: the loss of their children and husband. Steinbeck states that women can do better than men, so they are always ready to face the struggles of life. With this attitude, the writer breaks the previous shadow of misogyny that surrounded him in his early fiction.

Personally, it is believed that Steinbeck encourages male dominance over women, which is why he refused to reveal the name of his curly-haired wife and he only revealed his relationship with her husband and Lennie. Despite the fact that the novel was written in the nineteenth century, it still has relevance in today's society. Men have characters like crooks, curly, and Candy; each one represents the character of today's society. Discrimination is a significant issue that exists in the society. When we see Crook's character, we see how he struggles on the ranch. Though he is an African American, he is the black-skinned man who is the reason for the curly hair, and his wife starts to treat him differently. He stays alone; it is physically difficult for him to be forced away from society. Not only did the males face inequality in the nineteenth century, but so did the female.

However, when the two genders are compared, the female struggles more. Instead of helping others, they begin to show their gender inequality in that situation. White labor demonstrates racism towards black people. Not only the females have inequality, even the male also has inequality. Through the paper, we can analyse gender inequality and how women and

men are treated in America. This paper helps us to understand the depiction of feminine and masculinity issues in the novel and to study the instability of American women and men and their struggle in accordance with the social, historical, cultural, and religious atmosphere of American society. It explores how female and male characters are portrayed in the 19th century.

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