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The American Dream: An Illusion in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice And Men*

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The term 'American Dream' has been used in many different ways but basically it means that every man, in America, can achieve success in life through hard work and that everyone has the potential to live happy and successful lives. The origin of such an idea came from the very roots of the nation. In America's 'Declaration of Independence' it has been stated that "...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." In a society based on such principles, people would obviously hold greater expectations. Such principles presented America as a 'land of opportunities' where everyone regardless of their caste, creed, religion, race, ethnicity, and gender would be able to achieve success and upward social mobility. The historian James Truslow Adams defined the term "American Dream" in his book The Epic of America (1931) as that state in which :

...life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.

This 'dream' became the ethos of the United States. It also invited immigrants from all over the world, who looked forward to 'the promised land' or 'land of opportunities'. Everyone was very much inspired by the dream of turning from rags to riches. However the consequences were not very pleasant. Though many people made their dream come true, there was a great majority who got disillusioned by the dream. The 'dream' never became a reality, rather it turned into a nightmare. For many the quest for the American Dream turned out to be hollow, deceptive, and even destructive. The striving people realised that only hard work wasn't enough for making a dream turn real. It should be accompanied by one's luck too. This realisation revealed the cruelty of the dream- a dream which depended more on luck, than hard work and perseverance could not stand on egalitarian grounds. Thus gradually the pursuit of the American Dream turned out to be a futile and fruitless expedition. However the notion of American Dream has a nuance of subjectivity in it. It may vary from man to man. Some craved for materialistic prosperity, some stood for spiritual happiness, while many wanted familial bliss. Anyways majority people, invariably, dreamt of materialistic success.

Since the beginning of twentieth century, numerous authors incorporated the theme of American Dream in their plays and novels. Writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis explored the poor conditions of America at that time. They wrote seminal works that dealt with wealth, poverty, and the nature of success and failure in America. Some other examples are Mark Twain's *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), Arthur Miller's *Death Of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Crucible* (1953), and Saul Bellow's *Seize The Day* (1956). All of them were bent upon showing the bitter reality and the unpleasantness of the American Dream. Moreover the novels written on this theme were further infuriated by the Great Economic Depression of the 1930s which gave a further

blow to the utopian American Dream. The economic downfall all over Europe caused a great financial and economic trauma. The Great Depression made it more obvious that the American dream for success was a far-fetched dream. An instance of mocking at the American Dream is quoted from Alan Moore's comics *Watchmen* (1987):

NITE OWL II. But the country's disintegrating. What's happened to America? What's happened to the American Dream?

THE COMEDIAN. It came true. You're looking at it.

This makes it apparent that novelists and playwrights made continuous attempts to present the shallowness of the American Dream.

One such novelist was the Nobel Prize winning author John Steinbeck. Steinbeck was a passionate and prolific writer who mostly wrote about current social issues which demanded public attention. Steinbeck devoted much of his time and energy for uplifting the oppressed and downtrodden migrant workers who were always exploited by the capitalists for personal profits. He became the spokesman of the exploited workers and wrote most of his novels with the background of social inequality as the main theme. Steinbeck was born in the town of Salinas, California. This geographical area became the location of his fiction. This is in fact the most important biographical link between Steinbeck's real life and his fiction writing. This area is the source of his very genuine knowledge about the awful conditions of the poor migrant workers and labourers. Most of his characters – be it the 'paisanos' and bums of *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *Cannery Row* (1945), and *Sweet Thursday* (1954), or the migrant workers of *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) – are portrayals of the common man from the Salinas town or from California. Though Steinbeck wrote on other themes also, but critics considered him to be, essentially, a novelist of social consciousness. His three main novels *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* were post-depression novels and dealt with proletarian matter. While *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are more concerned with generalized social problems; *Of Mice and Men* is more involved with men- little ordinary men and their continuous struggle for sustenance and their chase of the American Dream.

Of Mice and Men was written at a time when the United States was in the grip of the Great Depression. There was mass unemployment throughout the land which further caused mass unrest. So Steinbeck wrote a novel which was a crude satire on the reality of American life. On one hand people were expecting of achieving financial success, and paradoxically, on the other hand the country was suffering from an economic downfall. This economic downfall was enough to give a jolt to people, and bring them out of the illusionary and fantasy world to the reality of events. But there still were such people who were not ready to give up and were strongly clinging to the 'dream'. Steinbeck's purpose seems to show that a hopeless and illogical sticking to a 'dream' would inevitably doom an individual and bring a tragic ending to his life. The final consequences would only be hopelessness and depression. *Of Mice and Men* also runs on this very theme of self-destruction and ultimately a tragic ending. The novel, subtle in its characterization, tries to personify the real hopes and dreams of working class America. It elevates the life of the poor and the deprived to a higher symbolic level.

The plot of the novel is a simple one but contains a multiplicity of meanings. Two migrant workers, George and Lennie, are travelling on foot in search of work. George is a short man with dark and restless eyes and sharp features. Lennie, on the other hand, is his opposite in every means. He has a huge body structure with great strength but shapeless features. By their conversation it becomes clear that Lennie suffers a mental disability but is very devoted to George. He is completely dependent on him for

guidance as well as protection. One of the ranch workers realises the innocence of Lennie and says, “He’s jes’ like a kid, ain’t he?” and George accepts the fact along with an annotation, “Sure he’s jes’ like a kid except he’s so strong” (Steinbeck 42). This very strength later out turns to be fatal for both George and Lennie. George and Lennie both start working on a nearby ranch. There they meet the boss of the ranch, his mean-spirited son Curley, who is newly married, and the ranch workers – Slim, the skilled jerkline skinner, who holds great authority as well as respect on the ranch; Candy, the old ‘swamper’, with his old dog; the insensitive Carlson and Whit; and the deserted and forbidden Crooks, the nigger.

The dream is the stereotype American Dream of having one’s own land where they themselves would be the boss. Generally home ownership is frequently associated with the American dream. It is a sign of success and independence, and it means that a person has the ability to control his own piece of property instead of being subjected to the whims of a landlord. Owning one’s own business and being one’s own boss also represents the fulfilment of the American dream. George associates a feeling of authority and belongingness with his own piece of land :

We’d belong there. There wouldn’t be no more runnin’ round the countrywe’d have our own place where we belonged and not sleep in no bunkhouse An’ when we put in a crop, why, we’d be there to take the crop up. We’d know what come of our plantin’.

(54)

Having one’s own land also meant stability in life, for George and Lennie. They didn’t want to live the life of vagabonds, always moving from one place to another. They wanted a land which would bring a sense of acquisition. Moreover they would be able to connect with it emotionally. Whatever would be sown by them, would be reaped by them. The fruits of their hard work would be enjoyed by themselves. There would be no mean and selfish boss to take that fruit away from them and pay them, in return, some bucks. The dream seems to be a simple and easy one and not hard to achieve; but the tragedy is that no matter how elaborately, George and Lennie plan, their plan doesn’t find fulfilment. The helplessness of man in front of the almighty destiny is one of the underlying themes of the novel. This theme is propagated through the title of the novel itself. The title of the novel is an allusion to a line of Robert Burns’ poem “To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough” (1785) : “The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men/ Gang aft agley” (38-39). Its meaning in English is that ‘ the best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry.’ This sarcastic statement is at the heart of the novel’s action and serves as a foretelling prophecy of all the action that is to come. Lennie being mentally disable has a weird craze for petting soft things. This habit of his was the cause of various dangers that George and Lennie had to face. Here, too, in the desire of touching the soft hairs of Curley’s wife, he accidentally kills her. Though it was an accident, still no one was to ready to overlook Lennie’s unintentional mistake. Thus George is compelled to mercifully kill his friend - companion and spiritual support - Lennie in order to save him from a brutal death. The death of Lennie was the death of their highly cherished ‘American Dream’ because it was dreamt by both in unison.

The other characters on the ranch also have dreams that they want to achieve but as all of them are isolated human beings, they never reveal their dreams to anyone. Curley’s wife dreamt of becoming Hollywood actress and earn fame. She considered herself beautiful and talented and thus believed that she deserves to be an actress. But the reality is that no matter how much talented an individual is, success doesn’t come to everyone. This is a complete matter of luck and destiny. But Curley’s wife couldn’t understand this and had to face disappointment.

Coulda been in the movies, an' had nice clothes- all of them nice clothes like they wear. An' I coulda sat in them big hotels, an' had pictures took of me. (79)

Candy's dream was a simple one. He just wanted security in old age and a home to live in – where he would not have the fear to be driven off after he becomes unable to work. Thus he is ready to invest his savings in George and Lennie's dream. Crooks' dream is one of having self respect and acceptance in society. He, being a nigger, was a social outcast in the so called modern American society which claimed of providing equal rights to everyone. Here, Steinbeck, through the character of Crooks, makes a severe attack on the shallowness and hypocrisy of the American dream as well as American ideals. He exposes the bitterness, the wrath, and the powerlessness of the black American who struggles to be recognised as a human being, let alone have a place of his own. The lines where Crooks expresses his loneliness at being neglected are very moving :

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 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. I tell ya,' he cried, 'I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick. (66)

The inequalities that underlie the fake claims of the 'American Dream' are furthermore mocked by Steinbeck in statements like :

A guy on a ranch don't ever listen nor he don't ast no questions. 'Damn right he don't,' said George, slightly mollified, 'not if he wants to stay workin' long.' (26)

This is the conversation between Candy and George. The conversation reveals the powerlessness of the poor ranch workers who are deprived of even the basic rights of asking questions and clearing doubts. In order to maintain a job security they need to be men who resemble machines, men who keep on working mechanically bereft of any kind of emotion.

Throughout the novel, Steinbeck brings out all the negative aspects of the 'American Dream'. The novel becomes an epitome of defeated hopes and the harsh realities of the 'Dream'. Moreover a tragic ending strengthens the pessimistic tone of the novel. However, as stated earlier, the dream wasn't completely a false idea or a delusion. The dream turned to be a concrete reality for many who came to America with a hope of achieving success. One example is a quote of Arnold Schwarzenegger (b. 1947), the famous Austrian-born American actor and body builder, who achieved great popularity and success in America:

My fellow Americans, this is an amazing moment for me. To think that a once scrawny boy from Austria could grow up to become Governor of California and stand in Madison Square Garden to speak on behalf of the President of the United States. That is an immigrant's dream. It is the American Dream.

Similarly, the 'dream' makes its presence real in the twenty-first century also. On being elected as the President of America on 4th Nov. 2008, Barack Obama – the first African-American president of America – expressed his gratitude in his 'election victory speech' :

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.

Thus, on these grounds of a positive hope, the novel shouldn't be completely disregarded as a demotivating one. There still are some rays of hope. Firstly the novel

brings out the note of friendship and commitment, irrespective of any personal gains. George and Lennie remain together not out of any compulsion. They are together because they really love one another. Lennie is ready to give up anything just for George's sake. On the other hand, George is not obliged to keep Lennie with him. Aunt Clara is already dead and there's no one to question George even if he leaves Lennie. But George, too, loves him and that's why he keeps Lennie with him, although he is a trouble-maker. George's genuine love and concern for Lennie is evident from George's act of killing Lennie, as he didn't want Lennie to suffer cruelly at the hands of the other ranch workers. Secondly, 'American Dream' doesn't stand only for material prosperity and financial success. The dream can also be achieved if someone is craving for spiritual satisfaction. Throughout the novel, commitment and companionship have been emphasised and beautifully portrayed in the relationship of George and Lennie. At the end, though George and Lennie are no more together, though their dream of material success/ of land ownership has died alongwith Lennie; still George is not left alone. He is not completely isolated. The novel ends on the hope of a new companionship – of George and Slim. And maybe this friendship would be a long-lasting one as both, George and Slim, are mature and sensible human beings. This new friendship may also acquire spiritual satisfaction. And in this way, the cherished American Dream would be achieved to some extent.

Anyways Steinbeck's purpose in the novel seems to stress on the idea that spiritual satisfaction is more important than materialistic success. People may or may not be financially successful, but if they really put efforts they can earn spiritual comfort for themselves. While people who are not ready to accept this reality might suffer mere drudgery and hopelessness, and their whole life would turn out to be an illusion.

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