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The Marginalised Figures in of Mice and Men from the Perspective of Marxist Alienation Theory

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Abstract

John Steinbeck's novel of mice and men profoundly exposes the manifold exploitation endured by labourers within the capitalist economic system through its portrayal of the plight of itinerant farmhands such as George and Lennie. Farm labours not only suffer the relentless exploitatiojn on the field of economy and systematic marginalization on the feild of socity, but also trap into a tough situation which is isolated and oppressed by competiton and divisions, thereby undermining the potential for class solidarity. The dehumannisation of workers is a destined consequence after suffering systematic exploitation: Workers are deprived of control over the products that are manufactured by themselves, and become aliened from their social and human attrubutes in the process of repetitive and meaningless work. This type of alienation corrupts essence of human being step by step, forcing labours becoming alternative tools of production and ultimately leading to the tragedy of dehumanisation. Steinbeck pinpoint that the "American Dream", concentrated on narratives of individual success, is essentially a deception perpetrated by American society upon the working class, serving as a tool to mask the exploitation and marginalisation of its lowest-paid labours.

Keywords

Of Mice and Men; Economic Alienation; Class Alienation; Alienation from Human Essence

1. Introduction

The novel of mice and Men, a tragic work published in 1937 by the American author John Steinbeck, principally recounts the travails, alienation, and catastrophe endured by two itinerant laborers, George and Lennie, as they pursue the "American Dream" amid the Great Depression of the 1930s. Through an economy of prose and an incisive perspective, Steinbeck delineates for the reader a sweeping social panorama of Depression-era America. The title of the novel appropriates a line from the poet Robert Burns—"The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft

agley"—to metaphorically signify the inevitable dissolution of the "American Dream" illusion harbored by the subaltern workers. The implicit representation of the exploited predicament of the working class constitutes the most profound force of social critique within the work.

As a highly intricate system of critical thought, one of Marxism's principal tasks in the analysis of literary works is to differentiate between the surface, manifest content and the deeper, latent content, and subsequently to link those latent themes with fundamental Marxist categories such as class struggle and the alienation of labor (Barry, 2023, p.200). The Russian Marxist literary critic Georgi Plekhanov stressed that "the language of literature can be 'translated' into the language of sociology—that is, literary facts can be assigned their 'social equivalents'" (Eagleton, 1980, p.59). As a mode of ideological expression situated within the social superstructure, literature necessarily constitutes a partial reflection of the contemporaneous class struggle, economic development, social consciousness, and other superstructural formations. In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck persistently insinuates the abject plight of the subaltern workers subjected to relentless exploitation by portraying their sunless, grinding labor and their paltry wages, alongside the unseen yet omnipresent figure of the ranch owner. The novel thus provides literary-textual substantiation for the Marxist critique of the bourgeoisie's exploitative and hypocritical character.

2. The "Marginal Man" of Economic Alienation: The Material Basis of Dehumanization

Marx conceptualizes economic alienation as encompassing two dimensions: the alienation of labor and the alienation of the labor process. Dehumanization, accordingly, constitutes the ineluctable corollary of the farm workers' subjection to both forms of alienation. This outcome, however, is by no means instantaneous; it constitutes, rather, a gradual process whereby the bourgeoisie, through an array of calculated measures, methodically refashions the farm workers from their external conditions to their innermost constitution.

The product of labor, as the most immediate result of the worker's toil, constitutes both the embodiment of his labor's value and the point of departure for alienation. Marx identifies in capitalist society an almost paradoxical verity: "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates" (Marx, 2018, p. 44). In the novel, George and Lennie, as itinerant farm laborers, find that years of exertion have yielded neither a stable existence nor sufficient means of subsistence; on the contrary, they are initially presented to the reader as fugitives—bereft of fixed shelter, perpetually afflicted by hunger, ceaselessly drifting from ranch to ranch to barter their labor for paltry wages, and possessing nothing beyond the meager hoard of beans scarcely adequate to stave off starvation. Yet they remain compelled to seek out the next ranch in

order to continue securing the barest necessities of life through their labor. George and Lennie are thereby enmeshed in a self-perpetuating cycle of immiseration—a logic of existence deliberately fabricated by the bourgeoisie in which the poorer they become, the more they must work, and the more they work, the poorer they become. Marx further explicates this logic of existence, asserting that:

"This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces – labor's product – confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer" (Marx, 2018, p.44).

The product of the worker's labor, far from belonging to him, is transformed into an alien power that he himself is compelled to pursue. Subjected to the dominion of this alien power, George and Lennie are, on the one hand, driven to chase after it as their sole means of subsistence, and, on the other, perversely compelled to attempt, through this very alien force, to realize their dream of owning land. This forfeiture of the labor product, together with the enslavement to the alienness it engenders, constitutes, within the novel, the concrete manifestation of the itinerant farm workers' exploitation and alienation.

The alienation of the labor process transpires almost simultaneously with the alienation of the labor product. Marx contends:

The product is nothing other than the summation of the activity, of production. Hence, if the product of labor becomes alienated, the labor activity itself—that is, the process in its very essence—must of necessity be alienated. (Marx, 2018, p.47)

In actuality, the alienation of the labor process manifests concretely in the fact that the worker, within his labor, does not affirm but negates himself; his attitude toward labor originates not from his own need for autonomous agency and creativity, but from the necessity of satisfying an external exploitation imposed by the bourgeoisie. Labor is thereby transformed into a coerced and mechanized procedure. In the novel, the quotidian toil of George and Lennie constitutes a near-perfect reenactment of Marx's thesis on the alienation of the labor process. Their daily labor is monotonous and repetitive, affording them virtually no latitude for autonomous choice. On the ranch, their assigned tasks each day consist of performing specific manual labor precisely according to the employer's dictates. George, for instance, possesses physical strength far exceeding the norm— "able to carry four hundred pounds of barley sacks at a time"—yet he is constrained, solely under the boss's dominion, to repeat such backbreaking exertions as sack-hauling and plowing; for him, the labor process is not a path to self-realization but an ordeal passively endured. This mode of labor deprives them of any mastery over their work, reducing them to mere links in the chain of production rather than autonomous individuals. Another ranch hand in the novel, Slim, by virtue of his august bearing and consummate workmanship, enjoys considerable prestige among the workers. Yet even though his skill is so superb that he can "drive twenty mules at once," his essence remains that of a labor instrument under the capitalist's sway. His labor skill merely serves as a means of generating greater value for the capitalist rather

than for himself; the value he himself possesses remains meager. On the ranch, the labor of all the workers has forfeited its character of free and conscious activity and is transmuted into a coerced act of subsistence; the labor process no longer embodies human essence but instead becomes an oppressive fetter upon human nature.

3. The "Marginal Man" of Class Alienation: The Objective Conditions of Dehumanization

3.1. The Dual External Oppression of Economic Exploitation and Social Marginalization

Marx, in The Communist Manifesto, inscribes the following passage:

"Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, is distinguished by this singular characteristic: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is increasingly riven into two great hostile camps, into two classes confronting each other in direct opposition: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat." (Marx, 2018, p. 37)

In Of Mice and Men, the external oppression exerted upon the working class is manifested principally through the institutionalized subjugation of economic exploitation and social marginalization perpetrated by the bourgeoisie. This oppression not only expropriates from the working class the products of their labor, thereby depriving them of their fundamental means of subsistence and production, but simultaneously condemns them to a state of atomized isolation and helplessness within the social structure.

Economic exploitation constitutes one of the central manifestations of the external oppression inflicted upon the working class in the novel. Within the narrative, vast numbers of workers were dispossessed of stable employment and reliable sources of income by the American economic crisis. George and Lennie, as subaltern itinerant farm laborers, are compelled to relocate incessantly and to intensify their exertions merely in order to secure employment opportunities capable of sustaining bare subsistence. Yet even after arduous and unremitting toil, the remuneration they receive scarcely suffices to maintain the most rudimentary livelihood. This is rendered palpably evident in the episode wherein George conspires with the aging ranch hand Candy to realize their "land dream"; George estimates his and Lennie's earnings thus: "Look, if me and Lennie work a whole month and don't spend a cent, we'll have a hundred bucks" (Steinbeck, 2019, p.60). Although this derives from a manifestly unrealistic mode of estimation on George's part, it nonetheless unequivocally illuminates the fact that, even if the worker collective during the Great Depression were to forgo all consumption, the remuneration and means of production at their disposal could barely sustain the most elementary subsistence. This conjunction of depressed wages and the intensified extraction of surplus value constitutes a direct embodiment of the capitalist mechanism of economic exploitation. As Marx expounds:

"The labour of the worker produces wonderful things for the rich—but for the

worker it produces destitution. It produces palaces—but for the labourer it produces hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker it produces deformity." (Marx, 2018, p.46)

Under such an exploitative regime, penury and privation became the perpetual and unvarying predicament of the broad working class.

To complement the aforementioned system of economic exploitation and to perpetuate the workers' immiserated condition, the bourgeoisie reduced all social relations to a universal logic of pecuniary exchange. As Marx emphasizes:

The distinguishing hallmark of the bourgeoisie, in contradistinction to the feudal class, resides in its pitiless severance of the multifarious feudal bonds that fettered man to his "natural superiors," leaving no other nexus between human beings than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment." (Marx, 2018, p.39)

Within the novel, all that the worker possesses—indeed, even his very life—is rendered measurable and commensurable through money. Desiring to join George and Lennie's land dream, Candy confides to George: "I ain' t got but one hand left, and it ain' t no good. I lost that hand right here on this ranch. That's why they give me a job sweeping' up and doing' odd jobs. And on account of losing' my hand, they paid me two hundred and fifty bucks" (Steinbeck, 2019, p.60). Candy's monetization of his severed arm illuminates the bourgeoisie's deployment of money as a medium to accomplish the bodily appropriation and enslavement of the working class. The corporeal subjugation of the worker through economic instruments constitutes an inexorable strategy in the bourgeoisie's exercise of disciplinary power, and Marx further elaborates upon this condition of thralldom: "The culmination of this condition of slavery is that it is only as a worker that he can maintain himself as a physical subject, and that it is only as a physical subject that he can remain a worker" (Marx, 2018, p.46).

Social marginalization constitutes the systemic manifestation of the external oppression endured by the working class. Within the novel, the subaltern laborers confront not only economic exploitation but also systematic societal discrimination and exclusion. George and Lennie, by virtue of their perpetual itinerancy and lack of stable employment, are persistently designated by society as vagrants; their identities remain nebulous and precarious. Steinbeck neither explicates their origins nor employs any distinctive features or emblems to insinuate their identities—this very omission consistently intimates the marginal, essentially dispensable position occupied within the social order by the itinerant farm-worker collective epitomized by George and Lennie. Such a condition of marginalization not only dispossesses them of any sense of social belonging, compelling them to ceaselessly harbor the fantasy of acquiring a parcel of land that could anchor their identities and afford them self-realization, but also renders them profoundly more vulnerable when confronted with external threats. At the novel's denouement, when Lennie, having inadvertently committed homicide, is about to be subjected to the persecution of lynch law, he and George are incapable of availing themselves of the protection of

any social institution; this state of atomized desolation is precisely the outcome of capital's systematic subjugation and exclusion of the subaltern laborer.

In stark contrast to the atomized helplessness of the subaltern laborers, the bourgeois exploiters, by virtue of their hegemonic position in the distribution of the means of production, incessantly reinforce strategies of social marginalization directed against them. Within the novel, the exploiting class epitomized by the ranch owner—and more specifically personified by his son Curley as the holder of power—wields absolute dominion over the workers on the ranch. They not only determine the workers' employment or dismissal, but also, through such mechanisms as intimidation and punishment, exercise disciplinary power over them. Curley's wife, leveraging her class privilege, can arbitrarily threaten workers with extralegal lynching; she issues a mortal threat to the black worker Crooks: "Well, you just keep your place then. A single word from me, and I can have you strung up on a tree so easy it wouldn't even be any fun" (Steinbeck, 2019, p.82). Meanwhile, when confronted with the old worker Candy's defiance—his threat to report her for falsely incriminating Crooks—Curley's wife responds with utter disdain and sneers: "Go ahead, say it. What difference does it make? Nobody's going to listen to you, and you know it. Nobody's going to listen to you" (Steinbeck, 2019, p.82). Such conduct lucidly demonstrates the profound asymmetry of status between worker and capitalist, wherein the workers are divested of their human dignity and essential attributes, deprived of their own discursive agency within the social order—thereby underscoring the subordinated condition of the working class within the capitalist system.

Through his delineation of the economic exploitation and social marginalization endured by the farm laborers, Steinbeck elucidates the systematic external oppression to which workers are subjected under the capitalist regime—an oppression that not only dispossesses the working class of the means of subsistence and production, but simultaneously divests them of their human dignity and sense of security, thereby consigning the workers to a perpetually subordinate and vulnerable position within the contemporaneous social order.

3.2. The Internal Fragmentation of the Farm Laborer Collective

Internal fragmentation likewise constitutes a significant contributing factor to the exploitation and oppression endured by the working class. In the novel, this fragmentation is principally manifested in the atomization of individuals and the fissiparous tendencies within the collective. Such internal disintegration not only attenuates the collective potency of the workers, but simultaneously consolidates their subjugated and vulnerable position within the capitalist system. Marxism posits that working-class solidarity is pivotal to waging class struggle and ameliorating the social structure; yet, within the novel, this solidarity is systematically disintegrated by the bourgeoisie through a multiplicity of forms.

The atomization of individual workers constitutes one of the phenomena of

intra-class fragmentation within the working class that Steinbeck emphatically delineates. In the novel, the ranch laborers lead solitary existences, devoid of deep-seated affective bonds and mutual sustenance. Within the narrative, other ranch hands—Carlson, for instance—though sharing quarters with George and Lennie, evince an utter emotional indifference and estrangement toward them. At the novel's denouement, during the manhunt for Lennie, upon the collective's appalled discovery that George had preemptively put Lennie to death, Carlson, far from extending solace to George, immediately demanded, "How'd you do it?" (Steinbeck, 2019, p.108). Such callous disregard for the life of a comrade fully illuminates the emotional frigidity and estrangement pervading the working class, and mirrors the condition of atomized isolation confronting the working class within capitalist society. Owing to a dearth of shared affective bonds and common objectives, the ranch workers in the novel remain perpetually ensnared in a state of superficial solidarity yet substantive dispersion, incapable of mounting efficacious collective action.

On the other hand, intra-group fragmentation further attenuates the cohesion among the workers. Although the ranch hands belong to the same class, their interrelations are riven by antagonism and contradictions. Crooks, as the sole black laborer, remains perpetually unassimilated into the workers' collective, lingering at its internal periphery. On one level, he is subjected to discrimination by the other workers on account of his skin color. While Steinbeck refrains from rendering this discrimination through overtly explicit strokes, he persistently insinuates Crooks's victimization through a series of "exceptional treatments"—for instance, the workers' extreme exclusion of Crooks from their presence; in the allocation of lodgings, Crooks is segregated not with the other men in the bunkhouse but isolated alone in the harness room; and as Crooks himself declares: "'Cause I'm black. They play cards in there, but I can't play because I'm black. They say I stink" (Steinbeck, 2019, p.69). These details bespeak not merely a physical estrangement but also a collective ideological ostracism directed against the black laborer from within the workers' own ranks. It thus becomes evident that the ranch workers are far from internally united; rather than extending sympathy to a fellow sufferer in distress, they emulate the bourgeois modality, constructing an invisible hierarchical order within their own collective. Crooks, as a black man, undeniably occupies the most abject position within this hierarchy. Consequently, he suffers not only the oppression imposed by the bourgeoisie on account of his class identity as a worker, but also the deliberate marginalization and isolation perpetrated by his white fellow workers on account of his race. Through the marginalization of Crooks, Steinbeck reveals to the reader that even within the exploited stratum, a stringent hierarchical order and profound inequality persist—an internal inequality that constitutes a laceration scarcely amenable to healing for collective solidarity. This internally generated fragmentation renders the ranch workers perennially incapable of forging a unified stance, while their fissiparous condition renders them all the more

susceptible to manipulation and exploitation by the external bourgeoisie.

However, it must be emphasized that the variegated forms of internal fragmentation delineated in the novel are by no means fortuitous. Marx furnishes a more profound elucidation of these intra-class divisions within the workers' collective, namely that capitalism, through the calculated fomentation of competition and differentiation, deliberately attenuates the proletariat's collective consciousness. The isolation and atomization among the workers constitute the concrete embodiment of this very mechanism. Devoid of a shared foundation of interests and organizational forms, they are incapable both of recognizing their own class identity and of coalescing to mount a collective resistance against external oppression. In the novel, George and Lennie are preoccupied with contriving their private land dream; Candy is solely concerned with whether he might secure provision in his old age; and Slim, for all his considerable prestige among the workers, remains little more than an accessory to the capitalist apparatus of oppression. These disparate, self-serving preoccupations condemn the novel's workers to a condition in which they remain perpetually incapable of discerning common collective interests, perpetually riven by mutual suspicion, and ultimately, unwittingly, ensnared in the quagmire of individualism.

4. The "Marginal Man" of Human Alienation: The Culmination of Dehumanization

Marx maintains that man is a species-being. The existence and development of humanity must necessarily proceed from species-life, which is itself grounded in species-being. Under normal conditions:

"Species-life consists in appropriating the whole of nature as man's direct means of subsistence, and, further, in transforming nature into his inorganic body by making it the object and instrument of his life-activity. However, alienated labor, on the one hand, estranges nature from man, and on the other, estranges man from himself, from his own active faculties, from his life-activity." (Marx, 2018, p.49)

Thus, alienated labor is precisely the alienation of the species from man, which culminates in the alienation of man's species-essence. This form of alienation constitutes the ultimate modality of the farm workers' estrangement in the novel. The alienation of species-essence engenders a rift between the workers' species-life and their individual life: the telos of species-life properly resides in resolving the problem of human subsistence, while individual life should be directed toward the development of higher-order needs. Yet the alienation of species-essence reduces the workers' existence entirely to the exigency of mere subsistence, thereby radically foreclosing the cultivation of higher developmental imperatives within the sphere of individual life—such as the evolution of abstract concepts like the social character of individual labor and the sense of belonging. This condition of alienation compels the farm workers to subjugate their individual lives wholly to the resolution of how to subsist, a concern belonging to the conceptual domain of

species-life, thus forcing them to relinquish the pursuit of higher development and, unwittingly, producing within themselves a laceration of those social attributes that are the exclusive endowment of the human being.

Under Steinbeck's pen, the ranch laborers are pervasively denuded of their social and human attributes, degenerating into mere "labor machines" subjugated to the ranch owner's dominion. Man's species-essence ought to impel him toward free, conscious labor and the active constitution of rich social relations, yet alienation annihilates this very essence. In the novel, "the men who work on ranches are the loneliest guys in the world"; they possess no families, no fixed domicile, and are condemned to drift from ranch to ranch in unremitting toil, deprived of genuine affective bonds with one another. The aged worker Candy is accompanied by an ancient dog that has been his companion for many years. Like Candy himself, the dog is in its decrepitude, having forfeited its capacity for labor, and constitutes Candy's sole bond and reliance on the ranch. Yet the worker Carlson, on the pretext that the dog "stinks like hell," forcibly puts it to death. This evaluative schema—which measures the value of life exclusively by labor capacity—is precisely the forfeiture of human attributes wrought by the alienation of species-essence. Carlson's criterion for whether Candy's dog should live is predicated entirely upon whether it can assist the workers in continuing their labor; in essence, he adjudicates the dog according to the concept of species-life—namely, whether it can help the workers' collective resolve the problem of subsistence. The moment its labor value is perceived as null, its existential value is instantaneously pronounced nil. Concealed beneath this is the ruthless capitalist mechanism for eliminating "useless utility." The dog, as Candy's companion, ought to have been esteemed for its affective worth, yet in the eyes of the workers it is nothing more than a living entity that no longer possesses instrumental utility, its existential significance entirely instrumentalized.

The death of Candy's dog is fraught with symbolic resonance. When Carlson grasps the firearm, preparing to dispatch the dog, Candy attempts to resist, yet ultimately succumbs to muteness. This muteness constitutes not merely an acknowledgment of his own impotence to alter the status quo, but also insinuates the passive subordination of the laborer within the capitalist apparatus. Candy's inability to safeguard his dog parallels his powerlessness to command his own destiny. The dog's demise thereby transmutes into a metaphor, signifying the marginalized condition and the expropriation of autonomy endured by the worker within the social structure. This expropriation operates not merely on the material plane, but is inscribed with even greater profundity on the psychic plane—the laborer is compelled to internalize the capitalist society's definition of his life's worth, wherein survival is adjudicated solely on the basis of the possession of labor value, thereby progressively forfeiting his identification with his own species-essence.

5. Conclusion

Of Mice and Men stands as the representative work through which Steinbeck delineates the exploitative predicament of the subaltern itinerant laborers during the Great Depression. It serves not merely as a satirical indictment of the systematic exploitation of workers in contemporaneous American society, but simultaneously prompts the reader to critically re-examine whether the "American Dream" is indeed as radiant as proclaimed. Through its multidimensional exposition of bourgeois exploitation, the novel lays bare the structural oppression inflicted upon the underclass by the entire American apparatus, together with the profoundly hypocritical essence of the "American Dream."

As socially marginalized figures, the itinerant laborers are subjected to a condition of marginality that emanates from multiple sources—the external oppression of capitalism, on the one hand, and the internal fragmentation within the workers' own collective, on the other—thereby exposing the intricate dimensions of the subaltern workers' exploitation. Under Steinbeck's pen, the marginal predicament of the workers is by no means a contingent arrangement of fate, but rather the inexorable product of bourgeois structural exploitation and systemic social alienation. The structure of economic oppression imposed by the ranch owners rigidly confines the workers to the precarious margins of subsistence, while the differentiation and antagonism engendered within the workers' ranks by disparities of race and class consciousness further erode the very possibility of collective resistance. The novel ultimately directs itself toward an incisive critique: the so-called "American Dream," which ostensibly proclaims that every individual may realize his aspirations, in reality functions as an ideological apparatus for the pacification of the working class, employing the illusory fantasy of individual success to obscure the structural predicament within which the collective is enmeshed. Only through the awakening of class consciousness and the healing of internal schisms can the laborer, upon the desolate wasteland of alienation, reclaim the very essence of what it is to be human.

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