

Portrayal of California in John Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown*: A Study

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Abstract

John Steinbeck's realistic as well as imaginative writings earned him worldwide recognition. Steinbeck's works set in California, where he lived his childhood. His works are descriptions of the landscape, the life of the farmer in the ranch. Joseph Wayne, the protagonist of the novel, *To a God Unknown*, who lived his early life in his father's ranch. When he grows, he feels that he has some connection to his own land. So he decides to move to California and start a homestead. His father says that after his death, his spirit may join him to create a farm in California. Joseph wants his land to be prosperous and he realizes that he is the heart of his land. So he planned to shed his blood to get rid of dry years. This paper is a study of Steinbeck's novel *To a God Unknown*, set in California, analysing the land, the farmers, and the connection between the people and the land.

Key words: Land, People, California, Drought.

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John Steinbeck was an American novelist who got awarded Nobel and Pulitzer Prize for his imaginative writings that earned him worldwide recognition. He was born in Salinas Valley, California, where he spent his early life until he walked out to Stanford University in 1919. Ed Ricketts who is the friend of Steinbeck got influenced his writing. Steinbeck gives time off for his writing and he used to have small trips to California with Ricketts. While their journey, they both collected the *Gulf of California*, which was a catalogue for the travellers and history of the nature, published, but the travelogue did not sell well. This travelogue greatly influenced in his future writings. Steinbeck, a Californian set much of his writing in the Salinas Valley near San Francisco. While “all the little towns” (Carter) now call themselves cities and many of “the farms and the ranches in the wilder hills” (Carter) are vineyards and resorts, the essence of Steinbeck's Valley of the world remains.

In general, writers portray and experience their Native land in most of their novels. Without the influence of their Native landscape, no great works would have been written. Steinbeck is not an exception for this above statement.

Writers like, Thomas Hardy, Mark Twain, and R.K.Narayan were great writers whose works influenced their Native land. Thomas Hardy's works set in Southwest of England and named it “Wessex.” “Hardy's Wessex” plays an important role in all his novels. The concept of Wessex is consists of the area of Dorset where Hardy grew up. Some of his Wessex novels are *Jude the Obscure*, *The Mayor of Caster bridge*, and *The Return of the Native*. Mark Twain who was born in Missouri, United States, he begins his career by his experiences and writing the novels based on

Mississippi River. Mississippi River is in the town of Missouri, U.S. His works are also classified as Mississippi Writings: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. These writers described their Native land in their works. They are very proud to write about the landscape and culture. R.K.Narayan whose works set in Malgudi, imaginary landscape of his native, *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, and *The English Teacher*.

Similarly, Steinbeck too influenced Californian in his novels. He established his Native land in most of his novels accordingly. Steinbeck covered an area from Santa Cruz and Watsonville on the north, to King City and Jolon on the south; westward, Steinbeck's country was bounded by the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Lucia Mountains, and to the east by the Gabilan Mountains. That slice of northern California is now popularly known as "Steinbeck Country" and the following towns are the setting for his novels, Jolon in *To a God Unknown*, Los Gatos in *Of Mice and Men*, Monterey in *Tortilla Flat*, Pacific Grove in *Cannery Row*, Salinas in *East of Eden*, and so on.

In 1933, while talking to his friend George Albee, he said:

I think I would like to write the story of this whole valley, of all the little towns and all the farms and the ranches in the wilder hills. I can see how I would like to do it so that it would be the valley of the world. (Letters 73)

As in the records of history of California, it is a place which is in the Pacific Region of the United States. It is nicknamed as "The Golden Rush," it is originally referred to the Baja California Peninsula of Mexico. It is located in Northern America.

In the history of California, talks the people, culture, language, and finally drought. The first people of California known as Native Californians before Europeans, people in California spoke 300 dialects of 100 languages. California, with its languages as Spanish, Mexican, Asian and Eastern U.S. cultural roots, it is a melting pot that joins together cuisines, languages and traditions from everywhere of the globe.

In California, the people used many languages; they are American English, Spanish, and Mexican and so on. Similarly, Steinbeck's people are the Californians; their language is English, which consists of regional dialects used by a particular group of people in California. The culture of United States is Western Culture, whereas in Steinbeck's novels the culture of California is attached to culture of the United States with the roots in the culture of Spain, Asia, Mexico, and Eastern United States.

There are two regions, Northern California and Southern California, shares a battle. "Norcal" or "Socal" is a large part of resident's culture. The Native American people who lived traditionally in the California U.S. are California Indian. The place coast region, California is like a home to some universities namely, Stanford University, the California Institute of Technology, the University of California, the University of Southern California, and the Claremont colleges.

Southern California influenced in most of the works of Steinbeck, in the novel *To a God Unknown*, Steinbeck portrays the character named Juanito is a Native American who lived and worked in California as a California Indian.

California's Landscape is complex; the state of California covers an area of 424000 square kilometres. The Coast Regions which extends north and south along

California, the broad central Valley, and the Sierra Nevada range, the Transverse Ranges of Southern California. California includes the winter rainfall portions of the Sonoran and Mojave Deserts. The foothill regions in California are normally dominated by mosaics of Chaparral shrublands and both evergreen and oak species.

The use of landscapes in Steinbeck's works is totally based on his native and his experiences. In the novels like *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row*, the deserts are used as background. The great live oak under which Joseph Wayne, the protagonist of the novel *To a God Unknown*, builds his house has its counterpart in a "brother" pine tree the young Steinbeck planted next to the family's Monterey Bay summer cottage on Eleventh Avenue in Pacific Grove: "If the tree should die, I am pretty sure I should be ill," he claimed in 1930.

Rainfall is centred on the winter months, and six months without rain is common. Drier areas along the coast and desert dominated by drought and a few species of rooted evergreen hard leaves. Northern and Southern California show a transition to Conifer forests, subalpine forests, and alpine forests increasing promotion.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the land, the farmers, and the connection between the people and the land in Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown*. The paper provides some of the historical descriptions of California's culture, people, language, cuisines. Steinbeck portrays California, examining the people, language, and drought.

In the novel *To a God Unknown*, Steinbeck portrayed the poor farmers who live close to the land. The protagonist Joseph Wayne who is actually a rancher born

and had lived on his father's ranch in Vermont. When he grows up, he feels a connection between the land and him. So he decides to move to California and there he plans to start a homestead. But his father does not want him to move from Vermont, after that he realizes Joseph's passion; he allows and gives him blessing.

Joseph reached long valley called Nuestra Senora, and there he recorded his homestead. Nuestra senora, described the long valley of 'Our Lady' in central California. Once he migrated to California and started hearing about the drought, dry years and so on. He convinced the farmer and he promises that they will never come again. While Joseph started his journey towards California, he met Old Juan, who says have a fiesta after built a homestead. They are four sons in the family of John Wayne, Thomas Wayne, Burton Wayne, Joseph Wayne, and Benjamin Wayne. Joseph's elder brothers got married already. The protagonist and his younger brother are not. He asked all his brothers to come there and start a homestead, under a great oak tree. He believes that this oak tree protect his home like his father. Joseph believes in the oak tree as the guardian spirit of the land.

Joseph met Elizabeth who is a school teacher, Joseph attempts many times to get marry with her, but at last, they got married in Monterey. They return to the farm, Burton who is devout Christian, does not like the way that Joseph worships the tree as his father's spirit. Joseph remembers the promise given to Old Juan, he planned to have celebration but Burton planned to girdle the tree before leave the farm.

Joseph and the other brothers discovered that Burton had a wrong conception of the tree. The rainless winter is going to come, everything starts to die because of drought, Joseph does not want to move from the land. The area gets dried and the

drought comes once, they never happen again. The forest portrayed in the novel is sacred rock, Pine forest.

Elizabeth and Joseph planned to visit the mossy rock, at that time she climbed in the rock, slipped and fell down, rock breaks her neck, died in the spot. Joseph returned to home Elizabeth's body with a state of shock. Once a rainless winter comes, Thomas and Joseph planned not to dry, and they thought that whatever the drought comes, they refuse to move from their homestead. Joseph can see the stream slowly gets dry, he decides to pour the water in the rock to be wet and alive. They planned to meet the priest; he says that there is no way to stop the drought. He can see the rock gets dry, he realizes that he is heart of the land. Joseph planned to shed his blood and he sacrifices himself for the rock to be wet. He fell down in the sacred rock and he assumes the rain will come again.

Through Steinbeck's novels, the readers can visualize the land of California, U.S. The place which Steinbeck chosen for the protagonist is River, Valley, and Deserts in California, U.S., and this is how the protagonist connected with their native land and the with the other human beings. If people like to visit California, they can have read the works of John Steinbeck, and so they can easily visualize California through imagination.

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