

Geographical Alienation of Migrant Ranch Workers in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

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Abstract

Of Mice and Men, a novella of John Steinbeck tells the story of American migrant ranch workers. This article observes and analyzes the alienation of the migrant ranch workers in the novella *Of Mice and Men* in Depression-era America in relation to American geography. The issue revolves around the major characters: George Milton and Lennie Small, as well as other minor characters. The characters in the novella suffer from alienation caused by unfair geographical conditions resulting from the uneven distribution of means and resources. After all, the characters become the victim of mental retardation and they perform inhospitable behavior to one another. To explore this state of alienation and geography, this article applies library research and content analysis of the novella. To moor the issue, the Marxist theory of alienation has been applied that discusses the influence of class economy in human interaction. According to Marx, in the capitalist mode of production, a worker is alienated from the production process, nature, society, and hence finally, with himself. In the novella, alienation related to geography is depicted in subtle and clear forms that the characters feel disconnected from society and the surrounding environment and ultimately from their intimate ones. The theme of alienation and geography is depicted in the relationship the characters share, in the plot, which presents the movement of the major characters from ranch to ranch in pursuit of the American dream, and in the setting, which represents Weed, California, as the place of poverty and inequality during the depression era. The harsh geographical conditions, as depicted in the novella, contribute to the theme of alienation of the migrant ranch workers, who are surrounded by poverty even in the crowded setting.

Keywords: Alienation, geography, ranch workers, unequal distribution, agony of poverty.

Introduction

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* depicts the unstable life of migrant ranch workers

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in Depression-era America. In this novella, the characters struggle with the issue of alienation, which is particularly caused by unfavorable geographical conditions. Thus, this research paper has attempted to uncover the theme of alienation in relation to geography from the novel. The article has been delimited upon the two major characters: George and Lennie. The discussion is made around the following research questions:

- ❖ What forms of alienation are evident in lower and middle class as portrayed in the novel?
- ❖ How do the major characters behave differently and unstably as a consequence of alienation and estrangement?
- ❖ How does the adversarial geographical condition contribute to the character's feeling of alienation in the novella?

The study of alienation in relation to geography in this novella is important because it provides insights into the social and economic as well as psychological conditions of depression era America, particularly for migrant ranch workers. It is also possible to understand the impact of poverty, inequality, and constant migration on the characters' lives and relationships. Likewise, the study of alienation in relation to geography can also shed light on more significant social issues, such as: influence of the class economy on human interactions and effects of economic and political instability in individuals and communities. This research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural context of the novel. Its themes and issues can provide valuable insights for observing human behaviors in contemporary society.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, geography is the scientific study of the earth's surface, physical features, divisions, products, population, etc. Place, space, location, pattern, regionalization, globalization, flows, networks, nature and society are the main geographical concepts, so nature and society are considered major elements of geography. The characters of this novella, being victims of the great depression, seek joy, pleasure and satisfaction in nature. The novella starts with the geographical description where Salinas River, yellow sand, Gabilon mountain and many flora and fauna are picturized vividly.

Writers and researches such as Nazanin Shayesteh, Clare Lawrence, Artis-Ann, Farzaneh Haratyan, Maria Guilhermina Silva and so on have focused on other aspects related to this novella, however, the issue of alienation and geography has not been highlighted. The novel has also been prescribed as part of the curriculum so that the research will be helpful to make a class discussion among students. The research gap is discussed in association with the aforementioned literature review. It is discussed in the following way:

- ❖ Very few researches have been conducted on alienation and geography related to this novel.
- ❖ The research works on the issue of economic reality which impacts human psychology and molds human dealings.

This article is based on library research which depends on literature review and content analysis. Likewise, the lines from the novella are also taken to prove the relevance of the theoretical base of the studies. Likewise, appropriate statements of the theorists are also cited to clarify the issue of the novel.

Alienation is a particularly popular concept used in Marxist discourse. It is the heart of a number of ideas and arguments and often has a very mystical nature. Alienation is also a concept that is frequently misunderstood or misused which is why it is important to become acquainted with Marx's description of alienation as well as its significance to Marxist theory.

Alienation refers to the feeling of disconnection of a person from family, society or the group of people. It is also a feeling when a person identifies himself having a lower level of affinity. The person suffers from a low degree of integration or common values, and simultaneously, he has a higher degree of distance and isolation. The concept involves a complex of sentiments and attitudes alienation from work includes especially the feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (E. G. West, 1969).

Karl Marx directly connects alienation to estrangement of the working class people as a consequence of division of labor. It includes a social stratification by which the working class people feel inferior and isolated. Furthermore, alienation results in the consequence of being mechanical part of a social class, the condition of which estranges a person from his/her humanity. To the discussion of alienation, Marx argues:

Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings. Each of us would have, in two ways, affirmed himself, and the other person. (i) In my production I would have objectified my individuality, its specific character, and, therefore, enjoyed not only an individual manifestation of my life during the activity, but also, when looking at the object, I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be objective, visible to the senses, and, hence, a power beyond all doubt. (ii) In your enjoyment, or use, of my product I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a human need by my work, that is, of having objectified man's essential nature, and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another man's essential nature ... Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature (Marx, 1932, p.71).

Similarly, self-estrangement is a condition in which a worker becomes 'alienated from his inner self, experiencing a kind of depersonalized detachment rather than an immediate involvement or engrossment in the job tasks' (E. G. West, 1969). The relationship between alienation and geography is complex and multidimensional, but in general, geography can both cause and exacerbate feelings of alienation. Alienation can be defined as a feeling of estrangement or disconnection from one's surroundings, whether it be from one's community, society, or the natural world. When a wo/man is well off, s/he forgets nature and starts to plunge into the material world. S/he forgets her/his land or geography too. After falling victim to an accident while enjoying immense luxury, s/he again becomes a proletarian whose companion is nature. Thus s/he returns from nature to nature again. Hence alienation and geography are together with each other in crisis. Geographers started to incorporate a Marxist definition of alienation into their work in the 1970s, and the concept was particularly engaged during the late 1970s and early 1980s when geographers following humanistic and Marxist traditions attempted to discover common ground. However, the term is now rarely used, indicating the profound shift in the terrain of debate in recent years as various issues raised within feminism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and cultural theory have come to the fore.

People who leave their homelands for economic, social, and other reasons feel isolated in the other distant lands. It is very hard for them to sustain in such an environment because it will be a challenge for them to win the hearts of local people, to get secure jobs and survive comfortably. They cannot return to their native lands because they have committed some sort of crimes there and are punishable. Though the present land may be beautiful and notable, they cannot enjoy the beauty of it, nor can they take advantage of the pleasant nature. They always feel alienated and alone. Melvin Seeman, an American social psychologist, has explained five varieties of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. The major characters, the ranch workers described herein *Of Mice and Men*, are also suffering from the same problems. They have left their native land and are alienated due to geography. This novella begins with the story of two fugitive ranch workers: George Milton and Lennie Small in Weed, California. George is an intelligent but uneducated man, and Lennie is a bulky strong but mentally unstable fellow. They hope one day to attain the dream of settling down on their own piece of land. Lennie's dream is merely to tend and pet rabbits, as he likes patting soft things. Lennie is an emotionally uncontrolled person, and he once grabbed the skirt of a young woman and would not let her go. This incident led Lenny to an accusation of rape, and both of them left their ranch in Weed, California. George is Lenny's protector and guardian, and he constantly retells Lenny about their favorite dream, which is to be the owner of their own land. The pair are hired into the new field, but they are confronted by Curley, the boss's son and a very short-tempered person. Curley has a Napoleon complex, and

he dislikes larger men. Curley has a flirtatious and provocative underaged wife to whom Lennie is attracted. Lennie starts to flirt with Curley's wife, which makes his antagonism to Curley. Likewise, George and Lennie also meet Candy, an elderly ranch handyman with one hand and a loyal dog, and Slim, an intelligent and gentle leader driver of a team of mules whose dog has recently had a litter of puppies. Slim offers a puppy to Lennie and Candy, whose loyal, accomplished sheepdog was put down by fellow ranch hand Carlson.

In spite of their problems with Curley, they make an affinity with Candy. Candy offers to pitch in \$350 to George and Lennie so that they can afford for their own farm by the end of the month. The three become very excited. However, their excitement does not remain long when Lennie crushes Curley's arm in a confrontation. Slim warns Curley that if he tries to get George and Lennie fired, he will be the laughingstock of the farm.

After that, George starts to isolate Lennie, and Lennie develops his communication to Crooks, another ranch worker who is isolated because of being black. Curley's wife also enters the stable and starts flirting with them. The next day, Curley's wife tells Lenny how her dream of being a film star has been crushed because of her husband's nature. She gives her hair to Lenny, and he starts to pat on her hair. After some time, she screams by the forcible touch of Lenny upon her hair. Lennie immediately strangles her neck and kills her. Lennie escapes from the stable before the police's arrival. George realizes the complexity of the case and he follows Lennie. He shoots Lennie at the end of the novella.

Geographical Discomfort and Alienation

Alienation refers to rootlessness or realization of isolation which forms the subject matter for observing the literary text. In contemporary writing, the subject of alienation has been explored in a variety of ways. A common theme in a lot of 20th century American and European novels is the estranged protagonist. The existentialist literature has addressed alienation in all of its aspects. Due to historical and sociocultural factors, it was also able to influence American English literature. Loss of identity leads to alienation. Modern fiction frequently explores the issue of the dispossessed personality's struggle for identity.

One of the significant factors which contribute to alienation in the characters is adverse geographical conditions. Firstly, the growing urbanization causes alienation of persons in the modern world, as stated in the discussion of how uncomfortable topography contributes to alienation by geographer Edward Relph:

The rapid growth of cities and proliferation of standardized environments have created a sense of placelessness, of alienation from the environment in which connection with the natural world and with other human beings have been broken. (Relph, 1976, p. 143)

The aforementioned lines also prove how a person seeks her/his connection to nature as he suffers from solitude in the urban area. As the person cannot accompany other persons, he finds himself alienated.

Another critic who has connected geographical connection to alienation is David Mithcell. He points out:

Geography can be a source of estrangement and disaffection for individuals and communities, as it can reinforce power relations and institutional practices that contribute to feelings of isolation and separation from others. (Mitchell, 2004, p. 125)

According to Mithcell, geography can not only be a source of estrangement and dissatisfaction for individuals but also it can be so for communities. Mithcell emphasizes that geography can play an important role both in individual and social parts as a source of alienation. There are many problems in the community such as crime, domestic violence, ethnic conflict, poverty, and so on and geographical isolation worsen such problems. In his book, *The production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre, a French Marxist critic, argues that geography is one of the vital things which reflects the social structure and power relations, through which a person experiences alienation. He argues: "The landscape of alienation is a product of the social order that creates it, just as the production of space is a product of the society that produces it" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.33). Social order creates the scenery of alienation. If the social system is effective, the social landscape will also be prosperous, as a result of which the people living in the society will progress. Poor social order pushes society towards poverty and people flee from their society to escape poverty.

Alienation and Geographical Theme

According to the story in the novella, in this research, an attempt has been made to find out deeply about the elements, causes, and effects of alienation and geography in society. The reality of every society is class conflict and people are lonely because of this class. The major characters: George and Lennie, in this novella are portrayed as lower class ranch workers who are socially, economically and even emotionally isolated. In the discussion of the novella, George once says to other ranch workers:

Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place....With us it ain't like that. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us (Steinbeck, 1937, p.13).

The aforementioned lines indicate the transient lifestyle of the marginalized ranch workers who constantly face economic marginalization. They experience alienation and displacement frequently. Likewise, the characters also have the quest of earning social prestige by being an owner of their own land and by overcoming destitution. George once speaks to Lennie as:

"Someday – ' 'we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and—" (p. 15). In George's voice he shares his dream of becoming self-reliant, however, such dream becomes unfulfilled and even they lack faith among each other despite being close friends. The central character George faces a lot of hope and despair in this novel as he has a responsibility of handling his mentally retarded guy, Lennie, however, Lennie's frequent repetition of silly things frustrates him. This situation leads to an investigation of the various forms of alienation and estrangement in this novella.

Similarly, the novella is contextually connected to the depression era of America which is also a cause of alienation and migration to different geographical locations of the characters. It was a very worst downturn in the American economy which has resulted in destitution of many people. It began with the crash of the stock market in 1929 and lasted in 1939. In this era, there was a massive decline of industrial and trade sectors; as a consequence people lost their property and they became unemployed. The people wandered from place to place in quest of job/employment after they became homeless. In the novel too, we can find out the effect of depression. In the novel, the old character named Candy says when he sees George and Lennie at the first working in the ranch:

I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an' that some damn thing in their heads. Hundreds of them. They come, an' they quit an' go on; an' every damn one of 'em's got a little piece of land in his head. An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it." (p. 74)

The aforementioned lines indicate that George and Lennie are the representative characters who have become a victim of economic depression who migrate from place to place in pursuit of employment. It is the economic reality which has obliged the characters to wander here and there who don't have enough resources.

After all, the plot of the novella tells about the life of farmers and ranchers and the continuous harvest failures that required them to leave their homeland to Southern California in the hope that this place is better than before. Overall, it reflected the great depression that occurred in America around the 1930s.

Alienation in the Setting of the Novella

Setting of a novel includes the geography too. In *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck uses the setting of the novel, a ranch in California, to convey the theme of alienation through geography. The ranch is located in a remote and desolate area, which serves to isolate the characters from the rest of society. A ranch is also a transient place where the workers are always on the move and do not have a sense of belonging. This sense

of isolation and rootlessness is a reflection of the larger societal alienation that the characters experience as itinerant workers during the Great Depression.

In the novella, the characters live in a bunkhouse. The place Weed, California is a barren land with low productivity. In the opening lines of the novella Steinbeck demonstrates the location of the story as: "A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green" (p. 1).

The characters dream of owning their own piece of land, a place where they can settle down and escape their current state of alienation, but this dream is never realized. Their longing for a sense of belonging, a home, is constantly thwarted by their circumstances, as they are forced to wander from place to place in search of work. Furthermore, the characters' physical distance from society makes them invisible to society and their issues, problems, and aspirations are not considered. They are not able to voice their opinions and society doesn't care about their struggles.

Steinbeck uses the setting of the ranch in *Of Mice and Men* to convey the theme of alienation through geography. The remote and transient nature of the ranch serves to isolate the characters and reflects larger societal alienation that they experience as itinerant workers during the Great Depression. The novella indicates its time setting as:

The bunkhouse was a long, rectangular building. Inside, the walls were whitewashed and the floor unpainted. In three walls there were small, square windows, and in the fourth, a solid door with a wooden latch. Against the walls were eight bunks, five of them made up with blankets and the other three showing their burlap ticking (p. 16).

Thus, the novella highlights the geographical causes of alienation through its setting. It employs an isolated region such as a small town, a rural community or an island where central characters feel disconnected from the rest of the world. Likewise there is a reflection of a sense of desolation, bleakness, or hostility, which also indicates characters' isolation. The characters also occupy the sense of being cut off from civilization owing to rough terrain and lack of resources. Finally, the geographical setting highlights the challenges and struggles faced by the main characters as they search their way out to overcome destruction.

The Geographically Alienated Characters

In the novella, the central characters have a close connection to the geography as they feel frequent alienation. The characters show various forms of alienation as they are the victims of the unfavorable geography. Firstly, George and Lennie wander in different places in search of stable work; however, they are always outsiders. They could not become a full part of any community. In spite of having a dream of owning their own land they are unable to connect themselves to the surrounding environment.

Candy is another character who is also alienated from other workers. He lives in a separate room which is near the barn with another man. His physical distance from the other men employs his sense of loneliness and isolation and he is unable to participate in the activities of other ranch workers. Likewise Crooks is the ranch worker of a different race. He stays in a separate place apart from others because of his inferiority complex caused by his race. Curley is also a character who is alienated from other ranch workers. He is alienated by the geography of the ranch because he is physically isolated from the other workers. He lives in a separate room near to the barn which contributes to his sense of loneliness.

The novella also demonstrates the different behaviors as they are alienated through geographical settings such as: change in attitude, quest of self-reliance, lack of faith upon one another, higher sense of vulnerability, social withdrawal and lack of adaptation in new culture. In this novel, the characters do not have a stable relationship among one another. In other words, they fail to develop their faith in themselves. At the beginning, George and Lennie are isolated from the ranch of Weed, California because of Lennie's improper behavior with a woman. The fault is of Lennie, however, George accompanies him because he does not have a proper trust with other workers in the ranch who will be supportive to fulfill his dream of being a land owner. Likewise, George gradually loses his faith upon Lennie because of Lennie's mental retardation. And at last, this loss of faith compels George to shoot Lennie who used to be his close friend. Therefore, the investigation of alienation and geography from this novel has become purposeful and appropriate.

Critical Points on Alienation and Geography

Of Mice and Men has received several critical appraisals. Firstly, Brian Reinking attempts to put on his critique on the title of the novel. He focuses on the question on why John Steinbeck has chosen this topic and what kind of connection can be found between "Mice" and "Men". His argument hovers around the poem 'To a Mouse' written by Robert Burns which conveys the futility of planning for a hopeful future in the face of unforeseen consequences. Likewise, *Of Mice and Men* also represents the absurdity of the dream which is similar to the castle in the air. At this juncture Reinking argues:

Burn's mouse represents the often futile hope and fruitless planning mortal creatures put into the future, the sadness and fear a being experiences when forced to contend with forces incomprehensibly bigger than itself, and, for the man observing the mouse, the regret over past deeds and anxiety about tomorrow... , it represents the truth about the American Dream and American capitalism and how an individual in America can be destroyed by the myth of tomorrow and the culture's mammonism. (Reinking, 2013, p.15)

The mouse is always hopeful to have easy meal for its survival though it is unknown and uncertain for it. It never plans for the future as the working class people do. They

know if they plan, it will fail. It is uncertain for the mouse whether it survives or not while receiving its meal. So are the working class people.

Similarly, William Goldhurst makes his judgment on this novel from religious and mythic-allegorical implications. He writes:

Of Mice and Men is a story about the nature of man's fate in a fallen world, with particular emphasis upon the question: is man destined to live alone, a solitary wanderer on the face of the earth, or it is the face of man to create for man, to go his way in companionship with another? (Goldhurst, 1971, p. 126).

A human being belongs to his/her respective society, but the society consists of different classes, culture and religion. S/he feels alone in the crowd if her/his desires and wishes are suffocated. S/he wants to be away from society, thus s/he is self-alienated.

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton argues the underlying intellectual disability, particular to Lennie, which is influenced by geographical location. He argues, "Steinbeck's understanding of the treatment of the intellectually disabled would necessarily have been influenced by his geographical location" (Moulton, 2012, p. 130). Likewise, Richard E. Hart analyses the novel from ethical perspectives. He argues:

Of Mice and Men presents dramatic situation and characterization that allows us to see and hear and feel ethical dilemmas and such social problems as: racism, sexism and economic exploitation in an immediate first hand way. Such issues are dramatically contextualized so as to provoke reader's reflection (Hart, 2004, pp. 33-34).

This novella not only narrates about George and Lennie, but also tells us about Crooks, Candy, Curley and his wife. Crooks is racially alienated whereas Curley's wife is sexually alienated. Candy is satisfied with his blind, lonely and old dog which is killed and he remains alienated. The ranch workers are economically exploited by their employer.

Samuel I. Bellman applies the notion of fear and control in the novella. According to him, Steinbeck has altered his assumption of life about orderliness of life and fitness. He discusses, "*Of Mice and Men* reveals an interesting paradox having to do with freedom and control" (Bellman, 1975, p.25). The right to behave, express, or follow as one wants without any restraint, and the absence of a despotic government is called freedom. Sometimes control disturbs freedom, but it reined in freedom too.

Geography can be a major contributing factor to feelings of alienation in several ways. For example, living in a remote or isolated area can create physical distance between individuals and the rest of society, leading to feelings of disconnection and isolation. Additionally,

living in an urban environment can create social distance, where individuals may feel disconnected from their community and natural surroundings. Certain geographical features can exacerbate feelings of alienation, such as living in an area with a high poverty rate or where there is a lack of social or economic opportunities. Furthermore, when people are forced to move to different places due to various reasons like war, displacement, or economic migration, they may feel a sense of disconnection from their homeland and the culture they grew up in, which could lead to feelings of alienation.

Conclusion

Geography can play a significant role in creating and exacerbating feelings of alienation. The physical and social distance created by geographical factors can lead to feelings of disconnection and isolation, and certain geographical features can make it more difficult for individuals to connect with their surroundings and feel a sense of belonging. This article has examined the theme of geographical alienation in the novella and found that the unfavorable geographical conditions in which the migrant ranch workers live contribute significantly to their alienation. These conditions include the physical distance between the workers and their families and friends, the social isolation that results from their constant movement from ranch to ranch, and the poverty and inequality that are endemic to the region. The study has also found that the Marxist theory of alienation provides a useful framework for understanding the characters' experiences of alienation. This theory suggests that alienation is a product of the capitalist mode of production, which separates workers from the products of their labor, from their fellow workers, and from their own humanity. The study has shown that these forms of alienation are all present in the lives of the migrant ranch workers in *Of Mice and Men*.

This article's findings have important implications for our understanding of the relationship between geography and alienation because it has shown that geography can play a significant role in creating and exacerbating feelings of alienation. The physical and social distance created by geographical factors can lead to feelings of disconnection and isolation, and certain geographical features can make it more difficult for individuals to connect with their surroundings and feel a sense of belonging. The study's findings also highlight the importance of understanding the impact of the economic system on human behaviour and interaction. The study has shown that the capitalist mode of production can lead to feelings of alienation, which can have a profound impact on individuals' lives.

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