

When Nature and Women Cry for Mercy: John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* from an Ecofeminist Lens

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Abstract:

Despite the prevalence of ecofeminist undercurrents in *Of Mice and Men*, relatively few critics have sought to trace this aspect. Indeed, the novella does not explicitly address ecofeminism. Nevertheless, an in-depth analysis of it shows that certain elements invite an ecofeminist interpretation. The narrative tackles, among other things, some issues with ecofeminist dimensions, such as women's inequality, the rights of minorities, animal rights, and land degradation. The community depicted in the narrative is a patriarchal society, which is driven by its tendency against dualistic thinking, which imposes barriers between things seeming opposites, such as male/female, civilization/nature, and human/animal. Such dualism or binary opposition fosters the idea that one is the master and the second is the servile "Other." Curley's unnamed wife is the only female character in the novella, which signifies how women were defined by their relationship with men rather than as independent individuals. Another character is Crooks, the stable black man who is always subjected to entrenched racism and prejudice due to his color. As for the weak and vulnerable, they are also marginalized and shunned in the patriarchal system depicted in the book. Despite its wonder and awe, nature is depicted as harsh and unforgiving toward humans' exploitative stances.

Keywords:

Animal rights, ecofeminism, nature, *Of Mice and Men*, patriarchy.

عندما تصرخ الطبيعة والمرأة طلبا للرحمة:

رواية (عن الفئران والرجال) للكاتب "جون ستاينبك" من منظور النسوية البيئية

الملخص:

على الرغم من وجود بعض الاشارات للنسوية البيئية في الرواية القصيرة (عن الفئران والرجال) للكاتب الأمريكي "جون ستاينبك"، فإن للأسف عددًا قليلاً من النقاد سعى لتتبع هذا الجانب. في الواقع، لا تتناول الرواية النسوية البيئية بشكل صريح. ومع ذلك، فإن التحليل النقدي المتعمق لهذه الرواية يظهر أن بعض العناصر تستدعي تفسير نسوي بيئي. حيث يتناول الكتاب، من بين أمور أخرى، بعض القضايا ذات الأبعاد النسوية البيئية، مثل عدم المساواة بين المرأة والرجل، وحقوق الأقليات، وحقوق الحيوانات، وتدهور البيئة الطبيعية نظرا للتدخل البشري. ان المجتمع الموصوف في العمل هو مجتمع ذكوري تقليدي، مدفوعًا بنزعتة ضد التفكير الثنائي، الذي يفرض حواجز بين الأشياء التي تبدو متضادة، مثل الذكر/الأنثى، الحضارة/الطبيعة، والإنسان/الحيوان وغيرها. مثل هذه الثنائيات دائما ما تعزز الفكرة بأن أحدهما هو السيد والثاني هو "الآخر" الخاضع والمستكين. فـشخصية "زوجة كيرلي" هي الشخصية النسائية الوحيدة في الرواية، ومع ذلك لم تُعطَ حتى اسمًا. لكنها معروفة طيله العمل بارتباطها بزوجها مما يدل على كيف كانت النساء يُعرّفن بعلاقتهن بالرجال بدلاً من أن يُنظر إليهن كأفراد مستقلين. فضلا عن ذلك، دائما ما نجدها منبوذة اجتماعيًا ومهمشة من قبل المجتمع الذي تعيش فيه . شخصية أخرى هي "كروكس"، الرجل الأسود الذي يعمل في الإسطلب والذي يتعرض دائما للعنصرية المتجذرة والتعامل بسبب لونه. أما بالنسبة للضعفاء والمهمشين امثال "ليني" و "كاندي العجوز"، فهم أيضًا مهمشون ومُستبعدون في النظام الذكوري الذي يصوره الكاتب. أما علي صعيد حقوق الحيوان المعنية به النسوية البيئية أيضًا، يمتلك الكتاب بعدد كبير من الحيوانات، التي تُصوّر أيضًا على أنها ضعيفة ومحتقرة وغالبًا ما تلقي نهايات مأساوية سواء عن عمد أو غير مقصودة. أما تصوير الكاتب للطبيعة، برغم روعتها وجمالها الواضحين في الرواية، كثيرا ما نراها قاسية وغير متسامحة، لا سيما تجاه مواقف البشر الاستغلالية.

كلمات مفتاحية:

حقوق الحيوان، النسوية البيئية ، الطبيعة، (عن الفئران والرجال)، المجتمع الذكوري.

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مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

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Introduction:

Despite its brevity, *Of Mice and Men* (1937) is considered one of the most famous books of the 1962 Nobel Laureate for Literature John Steinbeck, along with such books as his *magnum opus* *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *East of Eden* (1952), and his collection of short stories *The Long Valley* (1938). The title of this novella is derived from a 1785 poem titled "To A Mouse" by the famous Scottish poet and lyricist Robert Burns. Steinbeck's book was originally titled *Something That Happened* before he named it *Of Mice and Men* after Burns' poem. The title reflects universal themes such as the harsh realities of life and the fragility of dreams, more specifically during the Great Depression. The book has often been criticized for its stereotypical portrayal of women and minorities, particularly Curley's wife and Crooks, along with its vulgarity and use of profanity and sexually suggestive language. Nevertheless, it is still highly acclaimed and widely read, especially in many schools worldwide. While it cannot be categorized as autobiographical, *Of Mice and Men* reflects much of Steinbeck's early life and experiences with itinerant ranch hands in California during the 1920s.

Like many of Steinbeck's works, *Of Mice and Men* is set in the Salinas Valley, California, during the 1930s. The author's portrayal of the setting is idyllic and beautiful, though harsh, severe, and unforgiving at the same time. The beauty of the natural world, with its lush vegetation and fertile fields, is explicitly contrasted deeply with the harsh realities of the characters' lives and seems indifferent to their problems. This is depicted through the author's poetic language, more specifically from the very beginning of the novel:

A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool. On one side of the river the golden foothill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky Gabilan mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with trees—willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool. (Steinbeck 3)

The aforementioned natural landscape is actually idyllic and serene. The imagery of the beautiful “green and deep” river, the warm water twinkling over the sand under the bright sunshine, the grandeur of mountains, the lush green forests, and the fertile fields all evoke quiet, peace, and tranquility—filling us with deep awe, wonder, and inspiration.

Likewise, the faunae are portrayed idyllically in the same opening paragraph, along with the flora. The author speaks of the presence of animals, such as lizards, rabbits, raccoons, dogs, and deer, in the same natural setting:

On the sandy bank under the trees the leaves lie deep and so crisp that a lizard makes a great skittering if he runs among them. Rabbits come out of the brush to sit on the sand in the evening, and the damp flats are covered with the night tracks of 'coons, and with the spread pads of dogs from the ranches, and with the split-wedge tracks of deer that come to drink in the dark. (3)

The depiction of flora and fauna together in the same natural setting once again reveals the communion and harmony already established between the different elements of nature, the diversity of animal life in the region, and a balanced ecosystem. Most significantly, it reinforces the aura of serenity, interconnectedness,

and tranquility already cited above. Animals of different species right here get out of their holes and lairs to enjoy the beauty of nature away from the intervention of humans.

However, this communion between these natural elements is abruptly disrupted, if not entirely severed, and the author's cheerful and musical tone of narration dramatically shifts once humans are introduced or interfere in the scene. The relaxing description of nature soon gives way to harsh realities, represented here through the mention of some boys on a nearby ranch swimming in the pool, an ash pile left by many fires started by humans, and the introduction of two itinerant ranch hands, Lennie Small and George Milton, whose mere presence manifests the harsh realities of their world.

The strong presence of nature and its elements in *Of Mice and Men* makes the physical environment more than just a backdrop. It makes it a central character that occupies a major role that influences the other characters' moods, expectations, and dreams. No wonder one of the dominant themes tackled in the novella is humans' dream of having a better life and a more promising future, represented through the protagonists, Lennie and George. The idea that Lennie and George share a cherished dream of owning a small farm or a piece of land of their own symbolizes independence and privacy in contrast to the hardship they face on others' ranches as itinerant ranch workers.

Lennie and Animal Imagery:

Of all the characters represented in the novella, Lennie is described as animal-like and, therefore, in communion with nature and its elements. The author describes him in animalistic terms and frequently draws parallels between him and animals—reinforcing his physical strength, childlike innocence, instinctual nature, and direct connection with the natural world. No wonder he is described through animal imagery. Once he makes his first debut, he is first described as huge and strong as a bear:

[A] huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely. (4)

The comparison of Lennie with the bear is significant enough, as it highlights his physical power and instinctual nature. Again, the author goes further to describe how he drinks water from the pool: he “drank with long gulps, snorting into the water like a horse,” showcasing his animalistic instincts (4). Afterward, when his friend and caretaker George introduces him to the ranch boss, he describes him as “strong as a bull” (23).

Lennie finds solace and comfort in the natural world, particularly in stroking or petting soft and small animals like mice, rabbits, and puppies. This fondness has something to do with his vulnerability and his deep desire for companionship and dire yearning for acceptance. This affection is evident in his desire to have a farm with George, where he tends rabbits. Nevertheless, his physical immensity often leads to the tragic death of the soft creatures he loves. Ironically enough, Lennie, whose surname is Small, is afflicted with an immense and colossal body that makes him a burden to those living close to him. On his part, Lennie, who is mildly mentally retarded, cannot fathom this fact. As Alison Morretta puts it, “Because Lennie is unable to reason, he is closer to an animal than to a man” (Morretta 69).

Lennie’s mental disability makes him innocent and childlike, exactly like animals, especially the little mice that he inadvertently kills. As George puts it to Slim, “Sure he’s jes’ like a kid. There ain’t no more harm in him than a kid neither, except he’s so strong” (Steinbeck 44). His dependence on George for protection and guidance is also animalistic, as he seems like a little animal depending on his mother. At the same time, his colossal physical strength makes him a potential threat to others close to him. Like wild animals, he is unable to control his actions. The book ends with George shooting Lennie in the back of his head after the latter

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unintentionally kills a woman named Curley's wife on the ranch where they work. Bert Cardullo insightfully observes, "George then shoots Lennie as one would an animal, as he wants him neither to suffer a savage death at Curley's hands, nor, if he escaped death, to waste away in jail" (Cardullo 24). Once again, Lennie's connection with animals is stated again through the way he is shot dead. As cited beforehand, he is shot in the back of his head. This is the same way Carlson shoots Old Candy's sheepdog. For Carlson, Candy's dog has grown smelly, aging, and vulnerable—i.e., a burden to his owner and has to be killed.

Similarly, to control Lennie and keep him in line, George constantly threatens to prevent him from tending and petting rabbits, which traumatizes Lennie to the core. George uses the shared dream of owning a farm where Lennie can tend rabbits to control Lennie's behavior. Lennie is warned that he will not tend rabbits on their own farm if he acts mischievously toward anybody. Lennie's fondness for rabbits mirrors his innocent and childlike world, which contrasts with the harsh realities of the itinerant ranch hands he leads. It reveals his deep-seated love for both connection and affection. Also, it symbolizes the American Dream of owning land and leading a quiet and happy life.

Lennie's affiliation with the world of animals denotes the interconnectedness and unity of all living beings, which is a core principle of ecofeminism. Like women and animals, he is misunderstood, marginalized, and exploited by the society in which he lives. Although George is Lennie's caretaker, he exploits and manipulates him. On different occasions, George uses Lennie's mental disability to control him. He often threatens to part from him, which startles Lennie much. Of course, George does this to have control over Lennie, but one way or another, this is manipulation. It is George who creates the dream of having a small farm of their own to keep Lennie in line and thwarts him from making any mischief to himself or toward others.

According to George, Lennie is a burden. He says this explicitly to him in the opening chapter: “God, you’re a lot of trouble...I could get along so easy and so nice if I didn’t have you on my tail. I could live so easy and maybe have a girl” (Steinbeck 9). On his part, Lennie threatens George to resort to nature if he leaves him: he says he will live in a cave in the hills where he can live in communion with nature if George leaves him (14). Also, George asks Lennie to head for the brush if anything unpleasant befalls him: “Well, look. Lennie—if you jus’ happen to get in trouble like you always done before, I want you to come right here an’ hide in the brush” (17). Nature, therefore, is seen as a resort from any impending danger for Lennie.

From a feminist perspective, Lennie is perceptibly portrayed as the “Other” in *Of Mice and Men*. As cited earlier, George manipulates him as if he were a puppet. Also, he is the outsider of the novella due to his mental imbecility, which sets him apart from the other ranch hands. This is one of the main reasons that drives him toward the world of animals, where he seeks companionship. It is with animals, especially little and soft ones, that he finds solace and comfort.

Due to his intellectual limitations, Lennie cannot participate in the social dynamics of the ranch. The world of the ranch seems ruthless towards him and toward his peers. The other ranch workers misunderstand and exclude him from their community. What aggravates the matter for Lennie is his physical strength, which makes the others wary of him and keeps him at a distance from them. This is the reason that drives him toward George, his only friend and companion. Even Lennie’s companionship with George is disastrous for him as it distances him from forging other friendships. Lennie’s urgent desire for companionship drives him even onward to carry dead animals in his pockets. This is illustrated through the dead mouse he carries in his pocket in the opening chapter. He takes hold of it and only relents to hand it to George once this act exasperates George. Lennie’s dead animals symbolize and highlight his unintentional violence towards others

and, most significantly, foreshadow the tragic events that unfold in the novella later on.

Afterward, Lennie unintentionally kills one of Slim's puppies. While he tries to take care of the puppy, it happens that he accidentally kills it by stroking it too hard. Like the dead mouse, the dead puppy highlights Lennie's devastating strength and foreshadows his unintentional murder of Curley's wife after that. Lennie's inability to understand his devastating physical strength is obvious in his words to the dead puppy:

And Lennie said softly to the puppy, "Why do you got to get killed? You ain't so little as mice. I didn't bounce you hard." He bent the pup's head up and looked in its face, and he said to it, "Now maybe George ain't gonna let me tend no rabbits, if he fin's out you got killed." (84)

Here, Lennie cannot discern the difference in size and strength between the two creatures. However, Lennie's inability to understand his devastating immense physical strength reaches its culmination when he once again accidentally kills Curley's wife. His attraction to soft things drives him to grip her neck too tightly. The murder of Curley's wife shatters entirely the dream of George, Lennie, Candy, and Crooks of having a small farm of their own. According to John Seelye of Florida University, Curly's wife is a woman "whose actions disrupt and finally destroy the vision of a male-centered paradise, the Edenic parable beneath the pastoral weave" (qtd. in Bloom 83). A point to be stressed right here is that Curley's wife is not the only person whom Lennie kills. Lennie was about to kill another girl in the town of Weed, California, when he was trying to feel her dress. This is why he and George were kicked out of Weed. Furthermore, some people from Weed were about to lynch him.

Curley's wife strikes up a conversation with Lennie. She reveals to him her dream of becoming an actress, complains of her loneliness on the ranch, and expresses her dissatisfaction with her

life with Curley. Afterward, she asks Lennie to stroke her soft hair. On his part, Lennie strokes her hair with much pressure, which makes her cry loudly under his pressure. Instinctively, Lennie starts to shake her violently and covers her mouth with his hand to silence her screams. Like the soft animals killed tragically by Lennie, Curley's wife cannot bear Lennie's pressure, and this ultimately leads to her death.

Women's Portrayal in *Of Mice and Men*:

Curley's unnamed wife is the only female character who makes her actual debut in the book. She is always referred to as Curley's wife rather than by her own real name. Kimberly Parrott observes,

Her only identity is through her husband's name, and her dreams and desires are completely controlled by him as well. He tries to keep her isolated in the house and away from the workers on the ranch, but she is very young and very lonely and seeks out human companionship by visiting the workmen on occasion. (Parrott 106).

From an ecofeminist perspective, the affiliation of Curley's wife with her husband highlights her lack of identity and the tendency of the patriarchal society in which she lives to commodify and objectify her. Furthermore, she is depicted as the *femme fatale* or the temptress of *Of Mice and Men*. The author describes her as a lucrative woman whose appearance in Lennie's life leads to his horrific end.

At the same time, the tragic demise of Curley's wife at the hands of Lennie also denotes her deep desire for companionship. According to the microcosm world of the ranch, she is no more than a curse that afflicts destruction to those who come close to her. The ranch hands regard her as a social stigma. This is the reason why they desert and abandon her. On the one hand, they are afraid of her husband's wrath and violent temper lest he should find them talking to her. Curley's unquestioning jealousy is over, and he cannot stand seeing his wife talking to any worker on the

ranch because he sees this as a challenge to his authority and masculinity. On the other hand, the flirtatious behavior of Curley's nameless wife, which stems from her desire for attention, is misinterpreted by the ranch hands as trouble and a threat to their existence on the ranch. This is the reason why they all shun her. According to Historian Estelle Freedman, this character represents the plight of women in the 1930s, who suffered much from marginalization and discrimination. To quote her very words,

Estelle Freedman finds that her isolation and fears echo the 1930s status of "women as a minority group that suffered collective discrimination, received separate socialization, and generally fit sociological definitions of minority group status and behavior." (qtd. in Parrot 106-107)

From the very first moment she is introduced, Curley's wife is depicted as a temptress. Everything about her is described as *red*—a color that is traditionally used to emphasize her physical allure and sexuality in a male-dominated community in which she feels marginalized and powerless. At the same time, this color is used to refer to the color of blood, which foreshadows her tragic end at Lennie's hands. At the same time, this color foreshadows her role in the events that unfold later on, especially the murder of Lennie. Sometimes, redness is associated with the devil, the Tempter, who is often traditionally depicted as having red hair, highlighting the idea that she is a temptress. When she makes her appearance, the author describes her this way,

A girl was standing there looking in. She had full, rouged lips and wide-spaced 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. (italics added; Steinbeck 32)

Like the other ranch hands, George is critical of her once he first catches sight of her. For him, she is no more than a “tart” or a “tramp” (33). Then, he goes further to warn Lennie of her: “Don't you even take a look at that bitch. I don't care what she says and what she does. I seen 'em poison before, but I never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her. You leave her be” (33).

As cited earlier, the community of the ranch workers could be perceived as a microcosm standing for a larger world—i.e., the patriarchal society in which women come miles in rank after men. In this world, the ranch workers see Curley’s wife as a threat to their masculinity and social existence. According to Richard Hart in his article “Moral Experience in *Of Mice and Men*: Challenges and Reflection,” “Curley's wife views herself as a commodity, an object of sensuality. Clearly, she is regarded as property, as chattel of the ranch like the other powerless workers” (Hart 36). Furthermore, because she is the only wife on the ranch, her actions are inexplicably misunderstood and exaggerated. Despite her flirtatiousness, Curley’s wife is a pathetic creature simply due to her isolation, loneliness, and lack of agency. Therefore, her flirtatious behavior and her use of sexuality can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to attract attention toward her. Once her husband leaves the house, Curley’s wife desperately gets out and looks for anyone to talk to. Out of boredom and frustration, she is ready to talk to anyone, even to the elders and infirm ranch hands, especially Old Candy, the one-handed swamper, Crooks, the deformed black stableman, and the mentally retarded Lennie. The author aptly writes:

She stood still in the doorway, smiling a little at them, rubbing the nails of one hand with the thumb and forefinger of the other. And her eyes traveled from one face to another. “They left all the weak ones here,” she said finally. (Steinbeck 76)

Afterward, she goes on to inform the ‘weak’ trio that she is wandering despairingly about the ranch in search of anybody to talk to:

“Funny thing,” she said. “If I catch any one man, and he’s alone, I get along fine with him. But just let two of the guys get together an’ you won’t talk. Jus’ nothing but mad.” She dropped her fingers and put her hands on her hips. “You’re all scared of each other, that’s what. Ever’ one of you’s scared the rest is goin’ to get something on you.” (76-77)

Both Candy and Crooks try to drive her away as usual, but Lennie, the newcomer, is the only one who welcomes her. On her part, Curley’s wife is thrown into ecstasy because the new ranch hand welcomes her and is ready to communicate with her. Though he is one of those whom she insolently brands “weak” and undeserved, she prefers his companionship to her isolated existence. Despite her flirtatious behavior, Curley’s wife seeks companionship, not sex. As Barbara A. Heavilin insightfully comments, “She had only wanted to share a moment with a newfound friend. Isolated and lonely, Curley’s wife is a young girl longing for a friend, not a sexual encounter” (Heavilin 10).

The author’s sympathy with Curley’s wife is palpably apparent as her coquettish behavior is seen as a desperate attempt for companionship. Likewise, after her death, her physiognomy is described as angelic:

And the meanness and the plannings and the discontent and the ache for attention were all gone from her face. She was very pretty and simple, and her face was sweet and young. Now her rouged cheeks and her reddened lips made her seem alive and sleeping very lightly. The curls, tiny little sausages, were spread on the hay behind her head, and her lips were parted. (Steinbeck 91)

According to Warren G. French of Florida University, Steinbeck’s description of Curley’s wife after death “is one of the few departures from his dramatic objectivity in the narration” (qtd. in Bloom 81). Despite the reader’s sympathy for Curley’s wife

because of her desire for human connection, she exhibits some behaviors that could be perceived as racist and insolent. This is manifested through her use of racial slurs toward Crooks, reflecting the prevalent racism of the time period. At the same time, she insults and berates Old Candy when he implores her to leave them and go home. This is the reason why some critics, including Professor Warren G. French above, are surprised by the author's angelic depiction of Curley's wife after her death.

Curley's wife is not the only character who is stigmatized by the world of the ranch hands. The book also shows the suffering of the minorities, represented through the hunchbacked Crooks, who are the target of censure and entrenched discrimination. And this is also one of the concerns of ecofeminist activists. Crooks, the stable black worker, is another tragic character who embodies the themes of loneliness and isolation. Though his role is minor, his character is complex and multifaceted. As the only black man on the ranch, he faces discrimination and prejudice, forcing him to lead a solitary life in a separate room in the barn, away from the other ranch hands. He is always referred to as "the nigger" (Steinbeck 21). Crooks' room is filled with books, which he reads in order to pass his time. Like the other characters in the narrative, Crooks has his version of the American Dream as he aspires to share the dream of George, Lennie, and Candy of having a farm. It is through this character that Steinbeck wants to critique the pervasive racism of the 1930s against minorities.

Like Curley's wife, Crooks longs for companionship and human connection, a desire left utterly unfulfilled throughout the book. This is the reason why he feels jealous of the strong bond between George and Lennie. Afterward, he strikes up a friendship with Lennie and hopes to join George, Lennie, and Candy in their dream of owning a small farm of their own. However, his dream to live independently and to have belonging and equality is shattered once Lennie strangles Curley's wife.

Crooks' isolation and ostracization drive him to be cynical and resentful toward those around him. His cynical nature is the result

of years of racism and isolation he has endured on the ranch. It acts as a defense mechanism to protect him from any further hurt and is used against those who target him. His cynicism is apparent when he first scoffs at George and Lennie's dream, describing it as a pipe dream. He tells them that this dream will not come to fruition and that he has met many ranch hands with the same fantasy. Also, out of his loneliness, he teases and torments Lennie and tells him that George has abandoned him. This cruelty towards Lennie is attributed to his exclusion and bitterness for being alone.

Because of his cynicism and bitterness, Crooks seems unapproachable, even to those close to him. He cannot strike up any genuine friendship with the other ranch hands. It creates a barrier between him and the others. Of course, he manages to connect with Old Candy, but this relationship is fleeting and fragile. Afterward, he connects with the imbecilic Lennie as Crooks finds him more innocent and childlike than the others. He unburdens himself to Lennie, telling him his desire to join their dream. This friendship with the new ranch acquaintance offers a glimpse of hope for poor Crooks.

Like Curley's wife, Crooks evokes sympathy. He lives in an environment that does not welcome him, as he is ostracized and excluded by all those close to him. His constant yearning for companionship and genuine friendship is, indeed, pathetic. Nevertheless, Crooks, as cited earlier, is not a passive recipient of misfortune, as he defends himself vigorously against those who censure and scoff at him. His cynicism is a defense mechanism against those who take him lightly.

Oneness Between All Living Beings and Nature:

Ecofeminism is also concerned with the interconnectedness between all living beings and the physical environment. Both ecofeminists and animal rights activists share concerns about animal exploitation. They critique the patriarchal systems that underlie the exploitation and degradation of both women and

animals. At the same time, they advocate compassion and care for all living beings. The book is replete with an incredible array of animals. From start to finish, there are the mice cited in the very title of the novella, the mice that Lennie strokes and accidentally kills, snakes, rabbits, herons, a beloved sheepdog, little puppies, and many others. According to Susan Shillinglaw, "He [i.e., Steinbeck] considered man and nature to be interconnected, often using animal allegories to shed light on the human condition" (qtd. in Heavilin 138). This oneness or harmony between man and nature is one of the major concerns of ecofeminism.

From an ecofeminist perspective, the shooting of Candy's old dog highlights several key points that are related here. First, according to Carlson, a fellow ranch hand, the dog is old, blind, and useless to Candy, and Candy has to get rid of it. This reflects the patriarchal system, which values people and all living beings in terms of productivity and usefulness. Also, like its owner, Old Candy, who has lost one of his hands, the dog is vulnerable and marginalized, so action must be taken against it. Once again, this highlights the exploitation of the vulnerable within the patriarchal society of the ranch hands.

In the harsh world of the ranch hands, productivity is highlighted, and the infirm and weak have no real place. Like his aging and vulnerable dog, Candy is old, weak, and infirm. He identifies with the dog's plight and fears that one day the ranch hands will get rid of him, too. This is why he implores George to let him join them in owning a farm, as he wants to avoid being bullied. Despite Candy's pleas, Carlson shoots the aging dog. In so doing, Carlson's actions stand for the harsh realities of the ranch community, if not the whole outside world. Likewise, the shooting of the dog foreshadows Candy's potential fate, as Candy is very worried that he will be killed in the same way once he becomes weak and dependent.

Another example that highlights man's control over the natural world and shows the violence of patriarchy toward females is Slim's decision to drown four of the nine puppies of his bitch.

Though he considers this act practical, this shows how the patriarchal society represented through the ranch hands exploits nature for human benefit. According to Slim, he has drowned the four puppies to ensure the survival of the remaining one. Like Candy's aging dog that was shot for being vulnerable and weak, Slim has killed the weak puppies and spared the lives of the "biggest" ones. He tells Carlson, "Nine of 'em. I drowned four of 'em right off. She couldn't feed that many...Yea five. I kept the biggest" (Steinbeck 36). As a representative of the male-dominated society in which he lives, Slim prioritizes the strong and discards the weak and vulnerable. The idea that the mother dog is described as unable to care for all her puppies is significant here, as it underscores how females, both human and non-human, are undervalued and silenced in patriarchal systems.

Distortion of the Physical Environment:

In *Of Mice and Men*, the land is often distorted and exploited, more specifically through the characters' dreams and ambitions. For example, both George and Lennie aspire to own a piece of land of their own where they can live independently and happily away from the hegemony of farm owners. In so doing, they yearn for a better life in which they live in communion with nature. Nevertheless, this idealized dream turns out to be elusive and unattainable. Furthermore, it is always deferred throughout their journey in the book, which highlights the harsh realities of the ranch hands of the time.

Likewise, though depicted as beautiful and idyllic, nature is harsh and intolerable. Throughout the novella, the natural beauty of the California landscape is contrasted with the harsh realities of the ranch workers. This natural scene permeates with a great number of living beings, whether human beings or animals. However, most of these meet tragic ends, such as the innocent Lennie, the powerless Curley's wife, Old Candy's aging dog, Lennie's mice, and Slim's puppies. Despite the serenity and tranquility created by the beauty of this natural scene, death, vulnerability, and sad

endings are seen everywhere. At the same time, the same physical environment that is permeated with life and joy clashes with other harsh realities such as droughts, dust storms, and the appearance of dangerous animals like water snakes. At the end of the book, Lennie is shot dead by his closest friend and caretaker, George. Lennie is murdered close to the river, surrounded by natural scenes. Ironically enough, Lennie, the epitome of innocence, is killed in the same beautiful, serene spot that had previously held better dreams of peace and a better life for both the two men. Lennie's demise in nature underscores the theme of the harshness of nature. Nature, therefore, fluctuates between both beauty and violence. This juxtaposition underscores the harsh realities of the characters and highlights the fragility of human existence.

Throughout the narrative, women are absent from the scene. As cited beforehand, the only woman who makes her substantial appearance is Curley's nameless wife, whose destiny is controlled by two men: her husband, who exploits and dominates her, and Lennie, the imbecile, who inadvertently kills her. Nature, too, is controlled by only men. It is men who own the land. Also, it is men who aspire to have a land of their own. At the same time, this point is highlighted through the other ranch hands who work hard in brutal conditions for a meager reward from a capitalist system. Their relationship with the land is exploitative, too. They see nature merely as a resource to be menially worked and used, as a means for their sustenance, not as something to be respected or preserved. However, on its part, nature is unyielding and resistant. This is illustrated through the toil and sweat of the ranch hands, which reveals that the land is still reluctant to yield without hard labor. A key aspect of the narrative is George and Lennie's ownership of a farm—the American Dream. This vision turns into a fantasy at the end, highlighting once again the land's resistance and unyielding nature toward the two men and their peers. The novella, therefore, explores how patriarchal structures contribute to the exploitation of land and the degradation of women. Both nature and women are commodified.

**When Nature and Women Cry for Mercy:
John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* from an Ecofeminist Lens
Dr. Sayed Youssef**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

When viewed from the perspective of the characters' dream of land ownership, the irony lies in that, in the end, it is the physical environment that possesses and contains Lennie's corpse after death, not Lennie who owns and exploits it. Nature turns out to be Lennie's final resting place, which symbolizes the tragic inversion of his dream. The land does not offer Lennie, George, Candy, and Crooks refuge or fulfillment. Instead, it becomes the site of Lennie's demise.

Conclusion

Though ecofeminism is not explicitly stated in John Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men*, a thorough critical reading of this text shows some ecofeminist dimensions. One of the major points Steinbeck highlights throughout this narrative is the oneness, harmony, and interconnectedness between the different elements of nature. Likewise, both the land and women are exploited and degraded by the patriarchal system of the ranch hands. Curley's unnamed wife is the only female character portrayed in the book. She is depicted as deeply dependent on her husband's presence, manifested through her affiliation with him. She is not even given a first name and is always seen as a social stigma by the microcosm of the ranch hands, which, along with her husband, shuns and commodifies her. The author portrays her as deeply coquettish. However, this flirtatious behavior turns out to be no more than a desperate attempt on her part at social companionship and connection in the society in which she is ostracized. Another character that stands for human vulnerability is Lennie, the intellectual imbecile of the book, who is afflicted with a huge physique that embitters his life. Inadvertently, he kills the soft creatures he pets. However, his tragic demise is attributed to Curley's wife, who naively asks him to stroke her soft hair. Accidentally, he wrings her neck in an attempt to silence her, and she immediately dies. Ironically enough, Lennie is shot dead by his staunchest friend and caretaker, George, in the same spot that witnessed the birth of their idealized dream. Of the other

vulnerable characters is Crooks, the only stable black man whose colored skin subjects him to much racism and discrimination from all those close to him on the ranch. In order to avoid the entrenched segregation of the time, he turns to cynicism. Nevertheless, his cynical behavior is again an attempt at companionship and connection. The land is itself a character in *Of Mice and Men*. It is represented through the idyllic and beautiful natural landscapes cited from start to finish. Despite its marvelous beauty and incredible awe, nature is also unforgiving and unyielding to man's exploitation of it.

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