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An Intersectional Analysis of Race, Gender, Age, and Disability Discrimination in Steinbeck's "*Of Mice and Men*"

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Abstract

In this paper, a critical approach is undertaken to scrutinize the novel John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937). The paper employs the concept of intersectionality in order to view the ways in which the novel shows that discrimination based on race, sex, age, and disability is all connected and affects one another. Studying Crooks, Curley's wife, and Candy, the paper shows that Steinbeck shows their problems as something that comes from many unfair things joined together. Steinbeck shows that in 1930s America, some people were treated in a very unfair way. His novel is not only about their hard lives, but is also about a whole society that was unjust to them. Using an intersectional lens, the present paper demonstrates the way Steinbeck allows people to grasp the extreme injustice of society. *Of Mice and Men*

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is an influential novel that proves the fact that social classes do not vary significantly and makes readers remember that these issues still occur nowadays.

Keywords: age discrimination, gender inequality, intersectionality, racial prejudice, Steinbeck

تحليل تقاطعي للتمييز القائم على العرق والجنس والعمر والإعاقة في رواية جون ستاينبك "عن الفئران والرجال"

جنار كمال طيب
قسم اللغة الإنكليزية/ كلية التربية الأساسية/ جامعة صلاح الدين
و
هازه صالح حسن
قسم اللغة الإنكليزية/ كلية التربية الأساسية/ جامعة صلاح الدين

المستخلص

في هذا البحث، يتم تبنّي نهج نقدي لتحليل رواية جون شتاينبك "عن الفئران والرجال" (1937)، من خلال تحليل تقاطعي لاستكشاف كيف تُظهر الرواية ترابط أشكال التمييز القائم على العِرق، والجنس، والعُمر، والإعاقة. من خلال تسليط الضوء على الشخصيات المهمّشة مثل كروكس، وزوجة كورلي، وكاندي، تُظهر الدراسة أن شتاينبك لا يصوّر اضطهاد هذه الشخصيات من خلال عامل هوية واحد، بل من خلال مزيج من عوامل اجتماعية متداخلة. وتبيّن الدراسة أن شتاينبك يستخدم هذه الشخصيات لتسليط الضوء على الظلم الذي يقع عليهم ضمن السياق الاجتماعي والاقتصادي لأمريكا في ثلاثينيات القرن العشرين. وبهذا، لا تكتفي الرواية بتقديم تصوير لبؤس الإنسان، بل تُعدّ أيضًا نقدًا للّامساواة المؤسسية والتهميش الاجتماعي. ومن خلال عدسة تقاطعية، تُبرز هذه الدراسة كيف يُظهر شتاينبك البُنى العميقة للاضطهاد. ويمكن اعتبار "عن الفئران والرجال" أداة أدبية قوية تُجسّد الثبات المزمن للتراتبية الاجتماعية، وتُذكّر الجماهير الحديثة بأن هذه المشكلات لا تزال قائمة في ظروفنا المعاصرة .

الكلمات المفتاحية: التمييز العمري، عدم المساواة بين الجنسين، التقاطعية، التحيّز العرقي، شتاينبك.

1.Introduction

Of Mice and Men is a story written by John Steinbeck in 1937. It is very important because it shows what life was like in America during the 1930s. The Great Depression affected people's

lives; this makes the novel an important topic to be studied. The events of the novel take place in the countryside of California. It follows two ranch workers, namely, George Milton and Lennie Small, who strive to get their bread. They always dream of having a small land so that they can work on it. Their story reflects the dreams of poor workers in the 1930s in America. Steinbeck uses simple characters, like Crooks, Curley's wife, and Candy, to expound problems of some type of unfair life. The investigation of subordinate identities plays a pivotal role in expounding that American society was built on hierarchies of oppression.

It is worth mentioning that *Of Mice and Men* is consistent with other works by John Steinbeck, which seek to shed light on the plight of the disempowered and marginalized. This paper is a unique contribution because it uses an intersectional framework to explain the ways Steinbeck portrays intersecting types of oppression, especially those related to race, gender, age, and disability. Instead of considering all the axes of discrimination separately, this analysis helps us see how the characters in the story reflect the aggregate negativities of marginalized identities, thus enhancing our insight into the way structural power works in the context of the social vision as practiced by Steinbeck.

This study looks into what Steinbeck shows about the idea that discrimination is interconnected in 1930s America, and this is done through the characters of Crooks, Curley's wife, and Candy. To be clearer, it examines the intersectionality of axes of discrimination (race, gender, age, and disability) for the simple characters in *Of Mice and Men*. It sees the sights in Steinbeck's exploration of such institutional oppression as well as the standard of his society.

The analysis employs the intersectional theory, which is based on Kimberlé Crenshaw's ideas (1989). The theory maintains that identities are not felt separately. Rather, they are felt and lived in harmony. Power and marginalization mutually constitute the nature of these results

of diverse identities (Crenshaw, 1989, p.1241). This qualitative analysis fathoms Steinbeck's characters to reflect how the axes of discrimination work in harmony to result in their experiences. In this manner, the study makes it possible to be applied and projected in the present world concerning the social issues of the people who have subordinate identities. It is noteworthy that the significance of this study lies in its importance to the social issues in the present world. It shows that books can show unfair things from the past and make people speak about fairness.

Literature Review

There is a body of research that is related, in one way or another, to the topics of the present study. To begin, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000), by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, probes deep into the role of Lennie and Candy pertaining to worries about work and body differences.

Furthermore, Jackson J. Benson, in his biography *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck* (1984), examines how the life experience of Steinbeck with migrant workers and his need to provide a voice to the voiceless informed the ethical depth of the novel, particularly in George's controversial decision to kill Lennie out of mercy.

Bloom (2005) explains the characters as representative of those left out by the American Dream, especially that of a culture that favors youth, whiteness, and economic productivity. By examining the character of Curley's wife, Benson (1984) discusses the feminist connotations of her character, in particular, how her identity was lost through the author's choice to keep her nameless. According to Luttrell (2011), Crooks is introduced as one of the main symbols of racial marginality with references to such phenomena as institutionalized segregation and violence of the time.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative literary study based on close reading, an intersectional approach, and historical context. Other ideas in *Of Mice and Men* are discussed in an intersectional framework developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) to understand how gender, age, and discrimination based on race work together in the text simultaneously. The current research also embeds the novel into its historical setting—the Depression—to unpack the kinds of economic and social forces that influence the characters' experiences. By doing this, one will be able to properly decipher what Steinbeck was trying to criticize through the problematic issue of systemic oppression in 1930s America.

Discussion

Crooks is not just the single Black character in the novel; he is the intersection of race, physicality difference, and masculine norms to generate a unique and compounded marginality. Steinbeck literally isolates him in the harness room, a spatially isolating and therefore literally a racially isolating, denies him the male sociability of the bunkhouse, which serves as a source of protection, work news, and dignity to the whites of the workforce. This exclusion is exacerbated by his crooked back (an obvious physical impairment): it inhibits action and makes him economically and socially more vulnerable, whereby his race and disability combined constitute a decreased space of reactions to hostility. The tiny library of Crooks and his careful assertion of the purity of his room indicate a personal existence and a right to be a person which the social structure of the ranch constantly betrays; as Youssef (2025) points out, he represents the loneliness and the stratified isolation of the marginal person (p.116).

This layering can be seen in the scene with the wife of Curley: even though she herself is limited by gender hierarchies, by being white, she can transform gendered marginalization into a weapon against Crooks. She kills any flimsy prospect of interracial unity that might have emerged by threatening him with the social and extrajudicial authority of the whites, whom she can call upon (as in the instance where Crooks is briefly tempted by the thought of going away with George and Lennie). In other words, Steinbeck shows that axes of oppression are never merely summative; they exist in an asymmetrical relationship, so that even if Curley, as a woman, has a comparative lack of power, this does not mean that she cannot exert a catastrophic power over a Black, physically vulnerable man.

This distance represents the barriers that prevent Crooks from the accepted society. Crooks' feeling of loneliness is not about space only. When Lennie comes to see Crooks, the latter says:

You got no right to come in my room. This here's my room. Nobody got any right in here but me… I ain't wanted in the bunk house, and you ain't wanted in my room.

'Cause I'm black. They play cards in there, but I can't play because I'm black. They say I stink. (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 69)

Such an interaction is a microcosm of larger racial relations in Depression-era America: there are also hierarchies of oppression even within the group of marginalized workers, and Crooks, as a black man, ranks at the very bottom. It is not merely a matter of space that is being defended but an agonized assertion of dignity in a world that has continually denied the right to claim it.

Moreover, the physical disability of Crooks, which is a crooked spine, adds another dimension to the marginalization of this character. He is not merely excluded due to his race. However, it is devalued as well due to his bodily difference in an organization where physical strength is highly valued due to the intensity of the labour. His loneliness and ill will are illustrated in his derogatory statement, "This is just a nigger talkin', an' a busted-back nigger. So it don't mean nothing, see?" (p.71).

Crooks incorporates into his subject the two levels of discrimination, racial as well as ableist, and understands that his words only have a minimal value in a society where he is both racially and physically dehumanized. Steinbeck stresses the psychological price of such type of loneliness. In this way, Crooks describes a strong desire to be accepted and integrated into his society:

A guy needs somebody—to be near him... A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody…Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya," he cried, "I tell ya a guy gets too lonely, an' he gets sick. (p. 73)

This reflects the sensitive experience which result from governmental exclusion. Loneliness is a conscious act of dehumanization; it wears away his psyche and establishes him as an outsider. Bashar et al. (2019) point out that Crooks is largely ignored because of his skin color (p. 97). This shows that this marginalization exists within the racist frameworks that make him invisible and unqualified to be included in society.

In a word, Crooks gives himself a license to dream of an alternative. As Lennie and Candy discuss a dream of buying land and being free, Crooks requests to be included in the communication, "If you guys would want a hand to work for nothing—just his keep—why I'd come an' lend a hand" (Steinbeck,1993, p. 77). However, Crooks is refused by the whites.

Hussein and Abdullah (2019) observe that Crooks, the African American stable worker, offers to join in and work without wages, asking only for his basic living needs to be met. This shows that the marginalized characters have the smallest hope for inclusion (p.944). However, Crooks is refused by the whites. This transformation is after one of the most appalling scenes in the novel, where the whiteness and gendered power of Curley's wife threaten Crooks with lynching:

Crooks stared hopelessly at her, and then he sat down on his bunk and drew into himself. She closed on him. "You know what I could do?" Crooks seemed to grow smaller, and he pressed? himself against the wall. "Yes, ma'am." "Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny." Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego-nothing to arouse either like or dislike. He said, "Yes, ma'am," and his voice was toneless. (Steibeck,1993, p. 81)

This conversation summarizes the deadly racial hierarchies of the era, with even the most fringe whites still having the power to end a Black man with a spoken word. The fact that Crooks got a moment of hope, only to have it snatched away by this world, makes its point and supports the rather dark nature of the question in the novel of the barriers that were present to the racially marginalized in 1930s America.

His protective aggression, which was witnessed earlier when he glares and tells Lennie that he should get out of his room, is a psychological protest against his imposed marginality, Crooks reacts with a scowl and angrily orders Lennie to leave his room, responding defensively to being excluded from playing cards with the white men in the bunkhouse (Bouacida & Lahmar, 2022, p.99). This scene highpoints Crook's right of dignity in its simplest form.

It can be said that Crooks symbolizes the intersectional type of injustice in 1930s America. His flashes of hope are crushed by society, and this exposes the suffering of his

exclusion. Therefore, Steinbeck can illustrate the idea that discrimination is not only about separation; it is something more. It is the purposeful dehumanization.

Curley's wife is an example of the bad treatment of women. She has no personal name. This means that her identity is so hidden that she is considered only the wife of her husband. This is lowering her to male possession instead of depicting her as a whole character on her own. The male characters are distrustful and contemptuous of her. They regard her as flirtatious and dangerous. For instance, George warns Lennie as follows: "Listen to me, you crazy bastard," he said fiercely. "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" (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 33-34).

Think I don't like to talk to somebody ever' once in a while? Think I like to stick in that house alla time? She regarded them amusedly. "A guy tol' me he could put me in pitchers... An' I coulda. I lived right in Salinas. Come from there. Well, a show come through, an' I met one of the actors. He says I could go with that show. But my ol' lady wouldn' let me. If I'd went, I wouldn't be livin' like this, you bet. (p. 81)

These quotes highlight that Curley's wife is lonely, voiceless, and disempowered. Her namelessness and her inability to stay in that house day and night signify her status as an owned asset in a patriarchal society. As Manjhi and Tiwari (2017) note in their psychoanalysis of the situation, in the barn scene between Curley's wife and Lennie, she attempts to draw his attention to the softness of her hair, which later escalates into her struggling to break free from his grasp. The dialogue they exchange mirrors language often associated with sexual encounters, with Curley's wife making remarks like, "But mine is soft and fine… Here—feel right here… Feel

right aroun' there an' see how soft it is…," and Lennie responding with repeated phrases such as, "Oh! That's nice… Oh, that's nice" (Steinbeck, 1993, p.20).

Such symbolic libidinal desire makes her character difficult; she is not a mere hunter, but a mixed-up person caught in the net of undisclosed desires and unsatisfied needs. This desperation is evident in her interactions with the marginalized men in the barn, Candy, Crooks, and Lennie where she temporarily exerts the power by referring to the racial hierarchies of her era.

Curley's wife does racial acts in order to silence a black man. This reflects an intersectional condition. In addition, her sad story makes her character deeper. She reveals how she used to dream of having a life in film and fame, but finds herself with a man that she does not love:

Coulda been in the movies, an' had nice clothes—all them nice clothes like they wear... Because this guy says I was a natural. Well, I ain't told this to nobody before. Maybe I ought'n to. I don' like Curley. He ain't a nice fella. (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 20)

This shows that the ambitions of women are commonly ignored, and these women are enforced to stay submissive in home. They do not have chances to develop. Curley's wife's low control over her life is shown in her final scene, when Lennie unintentionally kills her.

She struggled violently under his hands. Her feet battered on the hay, and she writhed to be free; and from under Lennie's hand came a muffled screaming. Lennie began to cry with fright. "Oh! Please don't do none of that," he begged. "George gonna say I done a bad thing. He ain't gonna let me tend no rabbits." He moved his hand a little and her hoarse cry came out. Then Lennie grew angry (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 61).

The scene shows the tragic end of Curley's wife's story, which happens because Lennie cannot control or understand his actions. Steinbeck portrays the violence and helplessness of the moment with the help of vivid physical imagery. However, Lennie is frightened; his action proves to be fatal, bringing to light how dangerous his power, coupled with his underdeveloped mind, could be.

In death, this is the first time we get to see her as she is- her face has no tension or stress that controlled her life. Steinbeck finally depicts her in such a manner that a person can pity her. He does not portray her as a person attempting to seduce anyone but as a victim of the society that rendered her muzzled, unfree, and unworthy of herself.

Ultimately, Curley's wife embodies the silenced, constrained role of women in a patriarchal society—stripped of identity, denied her dreams, and trapped in isolation. Her short practice of power on Crooks expresses the intricate ranks of oppression. Her death shows that she is a victim of society, not of trying to tempt anyone.

Candy is afraid of becoming useless and, consequently, deserted, similar to his old handicapped dog which the other men want to kill. Thus, Steinbeck shows that the old and the disabled are viewed as a burden. Candy's wish to join George and Lennie's dream shows his need for safety in a world that forgot him.

This fear is made especially clear when he says with quiet desperation that they'll fire him soon, as soon as he can no longer clean out the bunkhouses. In a last attempt to secure some sense of belonging and usefulness, he pleads, "Maybe if I give you guys my money, you'll let me hoe in the garden even after I ain't no good at it" (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 61). This shows that oppression also comes from a capitalist system that deal with people according to their money

and physical strength. This idea is in line with Crenshaw's point which means that systems of oppression are connected, not separate.

Candy is so desperate to share the dream of owning land with George and Lennie, and this is not just economically intentioned but also driven by the desire to earn his respect and place again. The rage with which he defends the dream is the result of a lifetime of inability to own, contribute and be secure: "Sure they all want it. Everybody wants a little bit of land, not much. Jus' som'thin' that was his. Som'thin' he could live on and there couldn't nobody throw him off of it" (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 53).

What happens to Candy is a tale of structural abuse. When it becomes clear to him that he will not be able to live his dream settlement, his desire to live is filled with despair. Candy says:

You an' me can get that little place, can't we, George? You an' me can go there an' live nice, can't we, George? Can't we?" Before George answered, Candy dropped his head …. George said softly, I think I knowed from the very first I think I knowed we'd never do her. He used to like to hear about it so much, I got to thinking maybe we would. (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 94)

Ultimately, Candy's character highlights the cruel disposability assigned to those who can no longer meet the physical demands of a profit-driven world. His yearning to join George and Lennie's dream is less about material comfort and more about reclaiming a sense of purpose, belonging, and dignity that aging and disability have eroded. The collapse of that dream shatters not only his hope but also the fragile illusion that human worth can exist apart from economic utility. Through Candy, Steinbeck delivers a poignant critique of a society that measures value by labour alone, leaving the aged and disabled to confront both social invisibility and existential despair.

Crenshaw (1989) argues that the experience of intersectionality goes beyond simply adding racism and sexism together, and that without considering this concept, it is impossible to fully understand the specific ways Black women are oppressed (p. 140). In other words, oppression against Black women cannot be explored either in terms of race or gender as distinct categories. Rather, these power systems collide to create distinct strains of discrimination not shared by white women or Black men. For instance, the experiences of racism and sexism as experienced by a Black woman are situations where Black women experience both sexism and racism that cannot be explained solely through these terms.

Crenshaw explains the importance of an intersectional approach to legal, political, and social analysis, as it serves to demonstrate how prevailing structures tend to ignore or disenfranchise people whose identities occur across one or more axes of oppression. In the absence of such a framework, the specific risks and issues affecting Black women cannot be seen in the larger context of social justice.

It is worth mentioning that Crooks, Curley's wife, and Candy are literary representatives of overlapping systems of discrimination and oppression. The current discussion locates every single character in their socio-political context and draws on theoretical and historical approaches to explain the mechanisms of discrimination.

Crooks symbolizes the actuality of racialized subordination in the context of Depression-era America. Being kept out is not solely a matter of racial difference, but rather enhanced by his segregation in space, disability, and his stratification in classes. Collins (2019) demonstrates that African-American women have come up with a mode of thinking known as critical social theory. It is not composed of formal concepts alone; it is rooted in their lives and their daily struggle against injustice and inequality in a society based on the latter.

Curley's wife is a perfect illustration of how women were swept under the carpet and objectified in the education of patriarchal structures. Her marginalization is further cemented by the hypermasculine environment in the ranch, as her presence is viewed by the men as both a sexual threat and as not fitting in their society. However, she is stuck between her gendered oppression and her racial privilege. Curley's wife partially takes the upper hand in the key scene in which she appeals to the historic strength of white womanhood to bring forth the act of racial violence.

Crenshaw's (1989) idea of political intersectionality highlights, that women of color belong to at least two marginalized groups whose political goals often conflict with one another (p. 307). In this scene, Curley's wife, despite being suppressed due to her gender, can use her racial status to be dominant. Her dependent access to power demonstrates how people can actively participate in systems of power despite being subordinate to them. The scene provides an example of how intersectionality is about simultaneity rather than hierarchies in comprehending power.

Meyer (2009) illustrates that the character of Curley's wife goes beyond a mere representation of temptation or repression; she rather represents inherent power and victimization of the social construct of the novel (p. 128). This reading supports the notion that her subjugation is not monolithic; rather, it is intersectional.

Nonetheless, her subordination is not singular because it should be interpreted in terms of intersectionality, meaning a concept developed by the legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), to indicate how the various systems of power interact and generate distinct forms of subordination. Crenshaw underlines that the intersectional experience is more than the product

of sexism and racism separately. This enables the scholars to study the relationship between classes, and many others, which do not work in isolation but concurrently.

Candy is an expression of two axes of exclusion: ableism and ageism, both are capitalistic, equating human value with their working abilities. Drawing on Erving Goffman's theory of stigma (1963), Candy is positioned as a "defective" subject in an environment where physical usefulness and economic efficiency are valued.

Goffman states that the stigmatized person is expected to behave in such a way that it will remind people that his load is not heavy, and accept voluntary restrictions imposed on him by others (p. 121). Candy embodies this demand; his persistence on the ranch depends on the act of acceptance of not holding back despite his age and disability. His missing right hand is utilized as concrete evidence of a decreased worth, and his advanced age is used as a warning of the inevitability of being an obsolescence.

Stål (2025) observes that following the death of his dog and the decline of his role on the ranch, Candy holds tightly to George and Lennie's dream, using his determination to believe in it as a way to shield himself from accepting his fading relevance in a society that rejects the elderly and disabled (p. 25). The slaughtering of his old dog serves as a chilling story that mirrors the same fear that Candy has of being discarded. Candy reacts to this moment in a very expressive way. He says that he should have been the one to shoot his dog, George. He shouldn't have let a stranger do it (p. 63). This reflects Crenshaw's disapproval idea about single-axis because it cannot cover the discrimination that come from numerous social categories.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that in *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck shows that social classification (race, gender, age, and disability) overlaps to form intricate structures of exclusion. With the help of Crooks, the wife of Curley, and Candy, Steinbeck introduces marginalization as an interdependent system that determines who is deserving of dignity and inclusion by the society.

Applying the intersectional theory, this research makes a new interpretation of Steinbeck's social comments as something which is more than human sympathy. Steinbeck's writing is a result of showing that social categories have a very important role in controlling people's lives.

This study also illustrates that Steinbeck's message still has deep meanings in the present time. The problems of the novel's characters are not only from the 1930s. That is to say, such problems still exist in the current societies because people still suffer from their subordinate identities. In such a way, Steinbeck has the ability to say that the real justice is to regard every person as a human who has all rights.

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