



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

BURNING BRIGHT, A REALISTIC THOUGH ABSURD EXPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

In the words of John Steinbeck 'its difficulty' is the great issue inherent in the obsession of blood-line by his protagonist; Lovely Mordeen is burning bright as a woman subject in the play:

“ Despite its difficulty, the play-novelette is highly rewarding. It gives a play a wide chance of being read and a piece of fiction a chance of being played without the usual revision. I think it is a legitimate form and one that can stand a great deal of exploration” .¹ (Burning Bright)

Key-words: child, blood line, man-woman issue, solution though absurd

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The play-novelette *Burning Bright* (1950) is a realistic satire on life and human, man-woman relations, when one partner believes in bloodline the other partner believes in love and sacrifice put to a fallen state in the play; and it is burning bright for them but specially more to Mordeen. The play-novelette is composed in three Acts—circus, farm, sea and child. Writer tries to present the problem of sterility from a different realistic perspective. It is somewhat absurd that hero was made convinced on the issue that blood line is not all and a child is a child same to all though through the case of adultery (and not by the case of adoption of any other child); undoubtedly, the hero might take longer time to understand adoption and prolonged arguments might have been the requirement of the play-novelette but that could have been a convincing expression. In fact, no exact solution was put-forth by the novelist. The novelette projects total failure of the protagonist's character on the issue of bloodline when that was requisite. The novelist has propagated a wrong idea that might not approve by all readers. It could have been a more realistic approach but proved a very sad absurd expression, 'Burning Bright', has used after the mishandling of love, marriage, sacrifice and belongingness.

On one hand, it is a true love story and on the other a great satire on the profundity of male ego that man's immortality must be sustain by his own bloodline. In all, this concept, marriage and love relations are just mockery. Steinbeck tries to present different perspective as a new and great idea but it supported a wrong a relation and for the wrong cause. Though the result was good and desired, so easily achieved happy ending yet that could have been achieved by some other turning point also. The story revolves round the four main characters. All are symbolic of their nature. Mordeen is the second wife to Joe Saul; both love each other but their happy married life is without children. Joe Saul is shown getting old:

"A lithe and stringy man of middle age.... His jaws muscled against strain and cables down the sides of his neck. His arms were white and blue-veined, with the long cords of clinging and hanging rather than the lumps of lifting. His hands were white, the fingers spatula, and palm and fingers calloused from the rope and bar.

Joe Saul's face was rough and a little pockmarked; his eyes looked large and dark and glittering within their pencil edges." (*Burning Bright*, p.1)

Joe Saul is quite worried about his growing age as he is fifty years old man; and according to his friend 'a nervy thing' is observed in him. His first wife Cathy, is dead, she was also without child so has no heir of his property or land and he wonders "is it age coming on me?" (p.6) with the coming of the age he remembers the talks with his grandfather, Old Joe Saul. His grandfather used to say that:

"Have kids—have lots of kids! Be not ever without a baby on the fingers, a child on the mat, and a boy on the bar." (p.8).

Etc. etc., so Joe Saul is of lively and of the traditional mentality male:

"A man can't scrap his bloodline, can't snip the thread of immortality. . . There's a trust imposed to hand my line over to another, to place it tenderly like a thrush's egg in my child's hand. You've given your blood line to the twins, Friend Ed. And now—three years with Mordeen." (p.9)

Joe Saul had the sadness in his heart and on his nerves like Ernest Hemingway hero Jack Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*² (1926), although he himself accepted that it is not very unusual; it can happen, yet sadness seems dismal:

"... I know it is a thing that can happen to anyone in any place and time—a farmer or a sailor, or a lineless, faceless Everyone!" (pp.9-10)

In contrast to Joe Saul, there is Mordeen. She is 'fair and very beautiful' (p.11,). She is honest to Joe Saul but Joe fears because of Victor—a partner to Joe Saul' business of circus. Joe Saul loves and trusts Mordeen fully:

"Oh, my God! My God, Mordeen! You're a burning flower in my heart. See—I am harsh breathing like a boy. I'm full of you." (p.13)

In their sweet love story Victor enters, intentionally, as he wanted to have Mordeen like any other girl he had achieved. He is antagonist as an evil in the novelette:

"large and powerful, dark and young. His mouth was full and arrogant, his eyes sullen... his skin bloomed with youth." (p.13)

Victor tries to disrupt and dismantle Joe, and so struck by Joe on his face. The incident occurred when Victor refused to perform the show in circus due to sprain in his wrist and so got scolded by Joe:

"Whatever you do is an accident of youth and muscles. You have not the infinite respect for your tools and your profession—Profession! You have made it a trade." (p.15)

Victor replied with contempt "What's the matter—feeling old?" and next harped:

"...What's the matter—jealous? What's the matter—afraid you can't keep up with a young girl? Is she too much for you?" (p.15)

So, Victor tries to enter unreasonably in their happy married life. Victor did not believe that she is a happy woman; for him affection and love have no meaning in men- women relationship; to him youth, strength, force and lust are everything. In his defense he argued:

"Let me try, and swear to God you'll never go back to him. Ah! We're all alike, men, women." (p.15)

And she affirms her loyalty in sweet loving manner:

"I used to wonder why this love seemed sweeter than I had ever known, better than many people ever know. And then one day the reason came to me. There are very few great any things in the world. In work and art and emotion—the great is very rare. And I have one of the great and beautiful." (p. 22)

And when she was put to case study, that "You're setting yourself high, what makes you so special?"

She answered proudly:

"Joe Saul..." (p.23)

So, this much sincere is the relationship between Joe Saul and Mordeen. Beside her opinion about Victor is quite straight that she shares with Friend Ed:

“Victor . . . has an instinct for finding frail places and areas of pain . . . and still he feels probe like a leech and he gets blood.” (p.25)

Friend Ed is placed by Steinbeck as the fourth main character of the novelette as a symbol of friendship. He is family friend to Joe Saul. With him husband and wife, both, are at ease. They can open their hearts in front of Friend Ed. He is genuine character who understands both equally. So, he hears the problems of both and keeps them equally secret. Being a good judge and a positive thinker, shares their problem as if his own. He makes them understand each other and proved himself as the great secret-keeper of Mordeen also. He enquires about her privy:

“...can you have a baby?”

Mordeen looked away from him. “Yes, I can.”

“How do you know?”

“The only way I could know. I know.”

“When did it happen?”

“Five years ago.”

“Does Joe Saul know?”

“No, he doesn’t. It was before. It was all dead and done, before Joe Saul.”

(p.26)

Friend Ed is such a nice friend that he educates her about the man’s sensitivity; regarding the sterility:

“When the bodies of man and woman meet in love there is a promise—sometimes so deep buried in their cells that thinking does not comprehend—there is a sharp promise that a child may be the result of this earthquake and this lightning. This each body promises the other. But if one or the other knows—knows beyond doubt that the promise can’t be kept—the wholeness is not there; the thing is an act, a pretense, a lie, and deeply deep, a uselessness, a thing of no meaning.” (p.27)

He further explains man-woman relationship genuinely and also about the sterile love:

“...with a man—perhaps he may feel free because he is no danger; and perhaps the woman may feel widely free in lust without consequence, but in tissues there is contempt for a sterile man. And in a man there is a searching for the contempt he knows is there. Then, no matter how she pretends and protests and covers the sadness of the sterile love, he knows and feels it. (pp.27-28).

He advises Mordeen not to tell Joe Saul about his weakness. He is projected more ideal a friend than Steinbeck projected friends in his any other novel like *Tortilla Flat*³ (1935) or *Cannery Row*⁴ (1945). She explores herself in front of Friend Ed that she harbors some strange intention to help Joe Saul:

“Do you know I would protect him from hurt if I were ripped and burned in the process?”

‘That would be only a double burning.’

‘Do you know I am capable of any lie or cheat or violence—any good or bad that a human can conceive—for his content and joy?’

‘I think you are. And I wonder what tiny mote of chance there is of its succeeding.’ (p.30)

And, further, she demands his suggestion but he refused to take the responsibility for her wrong choice that she should conceive a baby from someone else for the contentment of Joe Saul:

“I tell you I will not advise you. I will not offer my responsibilities, I will not endorse your note of happiness. Anything, anything else. I wish I didn’t know, . . .” (p.30)

To add her plan ultimately she conspires with Victor. He agreed easily without knowing the result of their opportunist temporary relationship:

“I told you how tight and clannish we are in this business. I’m afraid we have a way of rejecting everyone who was not born in it and descended from parents and grandparents who were born in it.” (p.33).

And Mordeen clears further aptly to Victor:

"That is what I thought about," she said. "You are in our profession. If you stay you will have children born to it. We—I should not have cut you off the way I did. An act like ours is a kind of family, Victor. We—I should have made you feel more part of us." (p.33)

In this way, Mordeen succeeds in configuring a nexus with Victor confidentially.

In the next Act, The Farm—an expository one in a June morning, Friend Ed and Joe Saul are sitting together thinking about the land; and Joe Saul for his land is quite mournful that it had not any owner in the succeeding generation. Though, at the time he is having normal relations with Victor yet he is worried about: "It's like another person in the house." (p.43); at the same time he heard that unexpected news that he never heard from Mordeen earlier:

"we're going to have a baby."

And, "an earthquake of emotion shook Joe Saul."

He uttered as if speaking to his land "now it is all right."

(p.46).

In the excitement and happiness he remembered all his pains and un-budding of life spring. He was enjoying and celebrating the moment out of his heart with great enthusiasm. His nerves got young, fervent; he felt triumph in himself:

"...My blood is not cut off. My immortality is preserved. I am not dead! Boy? Girl? There will be more—and boys and girls."

And in excitement he tells Victor, "We have got a child,"... "It came from me—do you hear? It came from me. And it will be a piece of me, and more, of all I came from—the blood stream, the pattern of me, of us, like a shining filament of spider silk hanging down from the incredible ages."

(p.50)

Joe celebrated the moment as the greatest in his life by drinking in the name of the child, in the name of mother, and in the name of father. He started addressing Mordeen in different ways: "This empress," "this queen," and "this mother." (p.51). He was feeling all contented and swamped so he wanted to express his feelings by giving a good gift to Mordeen.

Victor was also feeling contented but he observed hatred for himself in the eyes of Mordeen:

"He saw hatred in her face as he had never experienced—hatred so cold and dangerous that he could not counter it. His eyes wavered and fell and turned away, and his eyes met Friend Ed's eyes, and there he saw an executioner looking at him with lethal, detached sternness, as though judging where to put the rope." (p.53)

But finding suitable time Victor tried to pressurize Mordeen to accept the truth that the child belongs to them, "Do you think I have no interest in my child?" (p.57). To that Mordeen answered in disgust, "It's not your child, Victor. It's Joe Saul's child." (p.57). He was not convinced with the idea:

"You know it is and I know it is. You know Joe Saul can't have a child. . . . This is my baby. I've got a lot of girls in trouble so I know I'm all right—but this is the first one that will be born. Don't you think I have some feeling for my own blood? Do you think I want to be used like a stud animal for the comfort of Joe Saul? Is that fair? He gets everything, and I get put back in the corral." (p.58).

A very straight answer in negation he got from Mordeen. The character of Mordeen is positive to Charlotte Rittermeyer in *The Wild Palms*⁵ (1939), a novel by William Faulkner, who is anti-mother figure as opted abortion and died in the course. Mordeen not only thinks of giving life but also puts effort to protect its right belonging as the verbal contract was:

"It's Joe Saul's baby, conceived in love for him. . . . You don't exist in this, Victor. The little seed may have been yours, I have forgotten, but no love was given or offered or taken. No! It's Joe Saul's baby. Joe Saul's and mine." (p.59).

She asked him to leave the place again and again, and in the process the year past:

“...Victor, I wish you could find the strength to go away. I’ve seen your suffering in this lifelong year. But the birth will be soon now, Victor. Please try to go away. I have not changed my mind in the year. It’s Joe Saul’s child. I threaten you Victor.” (p.59).

In this way the play-novelette proceeds carrying on the idea of adultery; in reality instead of adoption of a child from someone, Steinbeck is defending the perspective of immorality of man by persistent thinking of Joe of his own blood line. Everything was perfect in the novelette till the bringing of the Christmas Tree —the sign of festivity. As the birth time of the child was coming nearer, haunted Victor was getting impassioned so he left the family in the section, The Farm. The Act eventually ends with the novel idea of giving present to the child of his X-ray report.

Next Act III, and scene one reported that Victor failed to leave the child. He returned to force Mordeen to run away in the absence of Joe Saul and Friend Ed:

“...You are my woman and that is my child. I must have you.” (p.74)

And Victor said emphatically:

“...I must have you and my child.”... “I must have that. It would be good if you wanted me as much as I want you, but I must have you whether you wish it or not. This is my whole life. I won’t throw it away no matter what comes of it. Look!” “...I tried to run away and leave you and my child to Joe Saul. And I couldn’t do it. I came back. And I tried to be wise—to stand by like a cuckolded goat and see my woman and my child in Joe Saul’s arms. *And I cannot do it.*”

She replied with equal muster and rationale, it is Joe Saul’s child; and when Victor pressurized her invidiously that she should accompany him, else he was in the mood to tell everything to Joe rather she expressed confident that “He will understand, and it will be all right.” (p76). He countered her confidence that if everything would have been all right then “...Why didn’t he adopt a child?” (p77).

But Friend Ed was overhearing their conversation that moment he restricted Mordeen to kill Victor and took the responsibility of a friend by intervening at the moment. Being overwhelmed with the notion of friendship he ordered Victor to run away. While the entry of Joe was another dramatic turn in the novelette to intricate it; he was quite upset with the revealing of the truth by Doctor, Zorn. He was disgusted and shattered. He thought to kill Victor and find himself finished: “It is finished. My line, my blood, all the procession of the ages is dead. And I am only waiting a little while and then he chose his hard course.” (p.84).

Friend Ed performed his duty well multifaceted. He tried to clear Joe’s the vision about love and beauty. The work he did was not easy but the work he should have done earlier was found difficult. He performed great role for Joe’s family as he was quite upset with the wrong obsession of Joe. Joe came out of the misconception of his own blood line. But the point made by Mordeen that Joe will understand and it will be all right then, projected multicolored concepts of love and relations.

Here, Victor question is worth noticing that “why didn’t he adopt a child?” In fact, the whole novelette is shown based on the false assumption and poor understanding of Joe. Moreover, Steinbeck realizing his mistake in tracing Joe Saul’s absurd idea as central and trying to place reality around his absurd idea set the novelette to show infidelity in their love. So, to subside his mistake he tried to cover reality of multifarious criticism of the memorable play, in the words of Victor. In this way, an absurd expression is made ready with a question mark to play well before World.

In the next scene of Act III, the child has shown born. Mordeen is somewhat unconscious and Joe Saul enters the room with a mask. Mordeen was feeling as if all is dead and finished or the child is dead but climaxed; invincible Joe Saul assures her that he is happy that he has got his own son; that he has come out of the darkness and all mournful ideas; that the child has taught him a lot; and after the removal of his shame he unmask his face to Mordeen to show his happiness. He is now a developed man, but the way he got the lesson was not appropriate dealing by the play-write.

Burning was of Mordeen although she tried to adopt lesser wrong yet did blunder. Like Lena in *Light in August*⁶ (1932) her suffering was endless but her confidence was amazing. Critic sees it as “Steinbeck tries to make a morality play of *Burning Bright*, and his writings thereafter indicate a new moral bias.”⁷. Another time

"*Burning Bright* proves that "It is the duty of the writer to lift up, to extend, to encourage."⁸ But main point of discussion is that the effort which Friend Ed took in the end of the novelette that he could have taken before to clear the vision of the Joe Saul. To show a new way, an adoption of any child could have been another better proposal. Mordeen selected an absurd and strange way as women subjugation which cannot be a guide to the women world. It is nice idea that Joe Saul accepted the child but what about the universal implication of Mordeen's idea and presentation of absurd realistic perspective tried to project as unique by Steinbeck (as better and easy option was available to convince the world)? In this way, play-novelette is an unconvincing absurd expression without further universal implication though serves the end in merriment of union of family theme.

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