

JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE PEARL* – “AN EPITOME OF SOCIAL EVILS IN THE MATERIALISTIC WORLD”

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ABSTRACT

Steinbeck's *The Pearl* is a protest against social evils in the materialistic world. Kino, the protagonist struggles to come out of the whirlpool of cruel and greedy people around him. The group-man, pearl buyers and the town doctor manipulate to possess the pearl. His every attempt to safeguard the pearl ends in chaos. His frustrations and sufferings reach its height when he loses his precious son who is an invaluable pearl. The present article brings out the real picture of vicious evil men in this materialistic world, who would attempt to harm and grab the naive people's possessions for their materialistic pleasures and the protagonist's realization of the harsh reality.

Keywords: The Pearl, Social Protest, Group-man, Kino

Introduction

John Steinbeck's short fiction *The Pearl* was published in 1947. The Nobel Laureate Steinbeck was much inspired by a Mexican folk tale from La Paz, Baja California Sur where he had heard the tale during his visit to Mexico in 1940 from his friend Edward F. Ricketts. He wrote his *The Pearl* in 1947 based on the folk tale. His story was taken as film in Mexico named *La Perla* and into Kannada movie *Ondhu Muthina Kathe* directed by Shankar Nag. *The Pearl* brings out the societal maladies like people's greed for materialistic pleasures and the ideals of group-man that prevailed during 1940s.

The Pearl

The story revolves around a pearl diver who found an extraordinary sized pearl. He imagines that he would get all luxuries and pleasures when sells it, but to his disappointment he faced enormous troubles when he tries to sell it. People of his own village attempt to cheat him and ruin his family and at last dejected by immense trials, he throws the pearl back into sea.

Epitome of Social Evils

The Pearl is a social protest towards the corrupt civilization and materialistic world and people's attitude towards hoarding material wealth. The hero Kino an Indian Fisherman tries to step in and fight against the

modern materialistic society. The cruelty of the world is exposed through the characters of town doctor and the pearl buyer.

The story gives a clear picture of Kino's family and his straight forward living. Kino's son Coyotito was stung by a scorpion. Kino's wife Juana wants her son to be taken to a doctor,

"the word was passed out among the neighbours... And they repeated among themselves, 'Juana wants the doctor.'" (477)

Kino approaches the town doctor who exploits him and refuses to give treatment to Coyotito because Kino was penniless. The town doctor symbolizes the evils of commercialized society. When the town doctor comes to know about the pearl he pretends to be kind towards Coyotito who had almost recovered from scorpion sting. He gives Coyotito some powdered drug to please Kino, but Kino was shrewd enough understand the doctors intentions. Through the doctor's character Kino for the first time encounters the evils of civilized and materialistic world.

Kino imagined a prosperous life awaiting if sells the pearl for a good price. He could give good education to his son and better life to the family. Kino says:

"my son will read and open the books, and my son will write and will know writing. And my son will make numbers, and these things will make us free because he will know- he will know and through him we will know." (488)

Kino approaches a pearl buyer who tries to deceive him. The pearl buyers were very vicious and sophisticated and they exploited the innocent pearl divers. They were the portrayal of corrupt society in which Kino lives.

"Now there was only one pearl buyer with many hands, and the men who sat in their offices and waited for Kino knew what price they would offer, how high they would bid, and what method each one would use." (497)

Kino faces human enemies who are much dangerous than a scorpion. They scheme against him to grab the pearl, but Kino was fortunate enough to understand their plot and hides the pearl in the corner of his hut. The novelette chides the avarice of the greedy town doctor and criticizes the lowly attitude of the pearl buyer. Innocent, young pearl diver becomes the scapegoat at the hands of the corrupt society. He was completely lost and thwarted because he could not strive against the commercialized world.

The song of the family is heard throughout the novelette. Kino's people sing songs for everything about the past and the present. The songs were sung in same tune and the songs play a prominent role in each fisherman's family of the village. The songs signify the complete, secure and simple life lead by the family but at the same time it gives painful emotional impact to our mind. All the three Kino, Juana and Coyotito live in a paradise-like world.

Kino becomes vicious and strikes Juana when she tries to dispose the pearl one night and he also kills a dark assailant who tries to steal the pearl. Juana felt insecure and was afraid of the pearl because of increasing attacks and hurts. She says:

"This pearl is like a sin! It will destroys us" (496)

Kino's brother too says:

"There is a devil in the pearl. You should have sold it and passed on the devil" (511)

Kino was attacked by his men in the fishing village. He faced a great challenge and felt cornered by everyone, he becomes more insecure, suspicious and afraid of people. Juana asked Kino "who do you fear?" Kino said "everyone". Some try to steal the pearl, and at last his son was murdered. His dreams are blackened, his happy life was torn and his naiveté was strangled. In the words of Morris "Kino's wants are sophisticated; he sees in the pearl not the objects that can be bought, but beyond Coyotito's education will make the Indian feel,

social, political, and economic sophistication; new clothes and a church wedding will give Kino and Juana position and respectability, again a social sophistication; the rifle will give Kino power, an intellectual sophistication.” (155)

Kino’s hunt for justice, pride and respect is witnessed throughout the novelette, at last returns to his village wholly defeated by corrupt society. Death of Coyotito shatters Kino’s hope. Coyotito’s death awakens him and he returns to his village. Kino feeling completely lost with his son’s death throws the fabulous pearl back into the sea. Kino possessed two pearls, one was the real pearl which he found in the bottom of sea and another was his son Coyotito. After Coyotito’s death the fabulous pearl becomes unworthy because Coyotito is Kino’s invaluable pearl.

The literal pearl is the major symbol in the story. As Jain puts it:

“the pearl usually signifies purity or innocence which man loses and tries to find,” but on the contrary Kino has innocence and purity which are destroyed after he discovers the pearl.” (92)

Kino throws the pearl into the sea in the climax, symbolizes that it is the last option left for human beings. After facing many dreadful situations like losing home, his canoe and at last his son, Kino saw the pearl strangely, to him:

“the pearl was ugly, it was gray, like a malignant growth. And Kino heard the music of the pearl, distorted and insane...Kino drew back his arm and flung the pearl with all his might.” (527)

Kino, the primitive fisherman is a victim of corrupt society and he returns to his village. He has experienced the concept of man in three parts,

“man as just an individual, man as group animal, and man as a ‘successful’ individual, or ideal man.” (1)

Conclusion

The Pearl criticizes the human greed, materialism and corrupt society through the town doctor’s character. Kino’s family is an epitome of the fishing village and town is the miniature of the world. Both Kino’s family and the town represent the existence of the group-man and their communal divisions. The novelette portrays Kino’s complete transformation from an innocent pearl diver into a worldly-wise and experienced man. He loses everything in his life after discovering the pearl and becomes cruel in his behavior. After throwing the pearl into the ocean, he regains his soul and dignity. The novelette symbolizes both good and evil that is between natural world and corrupt commercialized materialistic modern world.

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