

John Steinbeck's Philosophy of Humanism in *In Dubious Battle*

Seema Rani

Research Scholar in LPU Jalandhar
& Associate Professor In English,
Govt. PG College, Sector-1,
Panchkula (HR).

A philosophical and ethical stance Humanism emphasizes the value of human beings and prefers critical thinking over acceptance of dogma or superstition. Humanists have concerns for 'human dignity and values'. In fact humanism means love of mankind and concern for its welfare and up liftment. Humanism does not means individualism which generates aloofness and competition in the society rather it means interdependence of one man on other and each works for the welfare of the human kind. John Steinbeck was an ardent humanist and his fictions represent the true human conditions during the era of 1930s in America. His magnum opus *In Dubious Battle* not only, presents the conflict between the proletariat and bourgeois but also voices the conditions that turn hostile one man against another. Present paper focuses on Steinbeck's humanitarian stance *In Dubious Battle* and his philosophy of love and compassion that can generate a better human condition.

Key Words: Humanism, Exploitation, In-humanization, violence, Love and compassion.

Stephen Law in his book *Humanism: A very Short Introduction* asserts that Humanism means "little more than a system of thought in which human values, interests and dignity are considered particularly important" (7). Although the word has been derived from the Latin concept 'humanitas' which Greek calls 'philanthropy, that signifies a kind of friendly spirit and good feelings toward all men without distinction. Humanism, originated in Italy in 13th and 14th century and later spread in all Europe. The term implies not only understanding, benevolence, compassion, mercy but also some assertive characteristics like fortitude, judgement, prudence, eloquence, and even love of honor. Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Salutati were the forerunners of the humanism. Sidney's *Arcadia*, *Astrophel and Stella* and Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* have the poetical development of humanism. The sixteenth century writers wrote about political, educational and moral problems, as their works were inspired by the classical writers: Cicero, Aristotle and Plato.

But in the nineteenth century Humanism was used for human values and morals. Humanists like Niethammer stressed the "need for a rounded development of an individual's power, physical and mental, artistic and moral, as opposed to merely technical or specialized training" (Abrams GLT 83). Friedrich Niethammer, a philosopher and theologian, born in Germany, coined the term 'New Humanism' in the beginning of 19th century. Humanism, generally, refers to a perspective that affirms some notion of human freedom and progress. Humanism is directly opposite to the totalitarianism in which one political party or government has full control over the people. Humanism promotes the moral worth of the individual and asserts that individual interest is above the interest of the group and state. Thus humanism emphasizes the well being of the human. As Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory* mentioned that, "literature holds timeless universal truth" and secure human values and works as a mean of transporting them to all classes (working class as well as aristocracy). Thus the function of a good literature is "enhancement of life and the propagation of human values". Steinbeck, as a man of letters, has deep faith in essential human values and his novels record the facts that are responsible for deteriorating man's condition on this earth.

Anderson Osterling, Secretary of the Swedish Academy, concluded his speech for the Nobel prize for literature, in 1962 thus “Dear Mr. Steinbeck, With your most distinctive works you have become a teacher of goodwill and charity, a defender of human values, which can well be said to correspond to the proper idea of Nobel Prize”(Benson 919). Objective of this paper is to analyze Steinbeck’s philosophy of Humanism and to prove him as a proponent and promoter of “human values”. Kant, father of the theory of ‘rightness and wrongness of actions’, reverberates in his book *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics (1785)* that “moral actions can be universalized, immoral ones cannot” (Dooley 153), Steinbeck, too strongly affirms that “helping human is an ethically required obligation or duty”. His fictions deal with basic honesty, simple decencies and human dignity. Many a times tagged as a communist, Steinbeck, in his book *In Dubious Battle (1936)*, blasted all the ideologies of the communism. Based on the first hand experiences of a strike leader, Pat Chambers, book received hostile reviews from the both, right and left critics. The novel is not a propaganda of any party ideology, but, it is a record of “problems of human greed and inhuman behavior toward other humans as a result of lack of understanding” (IDB vii). Yuji Kama in his essay, “Steinbeck’s *To a God Unknown* and Perspective of Whitman’s *Song Of Myself*” asserts that:

Exploring the social extensions of Darwinism, Steinbeck depicts human society as the stage for ferocious struggle for existence where the weak are apt to be destroyed by the strong according to an unforgiving law of jungle. (Steinbeck and His Contemporaries 26)

Thus in his novels, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *In Dubious Battle*, *The Pearl*, *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck advocates a human society, where oppressed, poverty stricken, haven’t should unity in the time of crisis.

Due to Economic depression, drought and floods the poor working class of America was on the verge of starvation. Without means and food they were ready to work at any wages so that their families can eat. In this hard times, instead of helping them, the Growers and farm owner were taking advantage of their condition by offering low wages. Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* recounts the epical struggle of poverty, against wealth at one hand and ill treatment of the one human beings by the other, in second hand. The story of the novel revolves round Jim Nolan, who has lost everything, his father, mother and sister too. When the novel opens we find him in a boarding room, without any hope and ambition in life. He reaches the party office, where he meets with Mac, Dick and Joy, communist party workers, with the hope of leading a meaning full life. Trapped in the sardonic party ideology, Mac and Jim, reach in the apple orchards of Torgas Valley, with the hope to organize the fruit pickers and to instigate a strike. Using Dan, an old worker fall from the ladder Mac instigate the strike which turns violent with the death of Joy. Both growers and strikers are quite inhuman towards the pickers and even women and children too were victimized in the clash of them. In the end, Jim face is blown off with a shot fired by the growers and Mac, a misanthrope, uses his dead body for “greater Good”. The novel ends on a sad note and John Steinbeck puts a question mark on the high slogans of moral human values and dignity.

.John Steinbeck, a champion of the downtrodden, himself worked with nomad and itinerant workers and formed the first hand understanding of them as an individual. While writing his novella, *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck often ventured in fields to understand the mannerism, language and way of speech of his living fictional characters. The book was written in 1930s against the background of economic depression in America, when wages decreased and agriculture production increased resulting resentment, protest and strikes of the wage laborer. As powerless and without means these strikes had often failed and easily pacified by the growers, re enforced the need of, to be organized and powerful leadership. Title of the book, published in 1936, has been taken from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in which battle indicates the revolt of Satan against God. But John Steinbeck used the term in relation to the poor haven’t and fruit pickers who don’t know the outcome of their struggle against the growers. Although the book has echoes of Marxian theory, of never ending conflict between proletariat and Bourgeoisie, but never to be a radical, Steinbeck powerfully speaks about the exploitation of the one man in the hands of the other. Here Steinbeck is concerned about the community’s well being, where every individual can survive with dignity.

In Dubious Battle hailed as a ‘proletarian novel’, and supporting the ideology of the radicals at surface level. The Californian growers, too, suspected Steinbeck as a conspirator with ‘red radical’. But, for Steinbeck, well being of common man is more important than any party and agenda and in a letter to his friend he frankly confessed:

“I don’t like Communists, either. I mean I dislike them as

People...they had equally bad manners.”(IDB p.vii)

Above statement directly counter the charge that in his works in late 30s, Steinbeck was more concerned about ideology rather than people. In Steinbeck’s works we find a commendable sincerity and realistic description of the events that took place in the decade of 1930s. He had an aesthetic sense and firsthand knowledge of the subject matter with which he was dealing. Steinbeck himself believed that an artist couldn’t remain detached from his work. Patrick Shade acknowledged in his essay, “Embedded Care, Embedded Harm: Challenges to Caring in Steinbeck and Morrison” thus; “*In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes Of Wrath*- Steinbeck explores the debilitating effect social and economic conditions can have on human relationships. In our particular tale, he spotlights the fragmented and isolated lives resulting from an exacerbated by a ranch industry that feeds of a culture of itinerant workers” (John Steinbeck and His Contemporaries 175). Steinbeck was moved by the human condition of his age and his creative writing is shaped by it. Many critics has went to the extent of questioning his works such as *Of Mice and Men* and *In Dubious Battle*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and charged that “Steinbeck had created an artificial world of which he had little or no direct knowledge”. Steinbeck left the university without completing his graduation and worked as labor in the ranches and fruit gardens .There he had a direct association with the migrant labor and Paisanos that supplied him with subject matter for his master pieces .As a man of letters, Steinbeck perceived not only their mannerism, speech and dialogue, but also the oddity, grimness and distress of their life. Biographical evidences prove that very early in life he made an association with migrants, bindle stiffs and bums and made an understanding with them. While working on the Spreckles Farm he developed a sympathetic attitude for these impoverished people and began to understand the requirement to root his creative writing in real people and incidents.

Steinbeck’s writing was moulded by the social, political and economical conditions of America. The period of 1930s in which his popular novel came was marked by spiritual degeneration and chaos. As a man of letters, he believes that literature should function to improve essential human condition. In his novels he presented man not only as an individual but also as a part of a group. Steinbeck believes that he has certain obligation as group man as well as an individual. Steinbeck manifests that “he cannot successfully be the second until he has fulfilled the first”.(Steinbeck Some Thoughts on Juvenile Delinquency p.22). Steinbeck had alliance with nomads and migrants but made acquaintance with sympathizers also such as Francis Whitaker, strike leaders who were prototype of Mac and Jim Nolan. These acquaintances helped him making first hand understanding of Group and individual, and of the labor movement. Steinbeck had a meeting with Cicil McKiddy, who was a farm worker leader and under cover, provided him with a great deal of material for *In Dubious Battle*. Benson in his book mentioned that in the summer of 1934 Steinbeck himself went to the migrant camp in the Salinas area “to listen to the workers talk”. It is quite clear that whatever Steinbeck presented in his novel is not the second hand information and his book is not a historical document, merely presenting events detail. *In Dubious Battle* is “a straight story” of real human events in which Steinbeck explored his phalanx,” the mob psychology of humanity”. Steinbeck never approved communist way of changing social set up. In a letter to his friend George Albee he divulged:

“I’m not interested in strikes as a means of raising men’s wages, and I’m not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition....”

Thus the novel is not a propaganda of any party nor it is the criticism of any class, rather it speaks about the behavior of one man that reduces the other in to a material and a thing of use only.

Hailed as a “strike novel” *In Dubious Battle* manuscript was rejected at the Covici’s office, because editor who had sympathy for radicals felt that the Marxist ideology of the strike organizers in the novel presented in an erroneous way. On 5th July 1934, San Francisco police shot two people and wounded many other in an attempt to break up Longshoremen’s strike, which provided background for the novel. Still, here, Steinbeck’s objective is not to present the 1930’s strike anatomy or the ideology of any party in the novel rather he vocalized the individual’s pain and agony, his relation and unification with the group resulting loss of identity. Both strikers and growers motivated, not by proletariat predicament, but by self interest only. When an individual joins a group, it doesn’t bring any change into his nemesis, just provide a cover for the behavior which he would not have nerve to initiate as an individual. *In Dubious Battle* Steinbeck focuses attention on double exploitation of proletariat, by the growers as well as by the strikers.

Book opens with Jim Nolan, who is seated in his room in “a soft red light”, alone depressed without any aim and ambition in life. Frustrated in a capitalistic society he arrives party office in order to join it, not inspired by any party ideology because his whole family has been ruined by this system”p.13. His father, Roy Nolan was shot dead in a riot by the cops and his mother died when he was in jail due to the false charge of “vagrancy” as he was arrested from a place where radical meeting was going on. He loses everything even his sister May disappears one day. Arduous memories of past haunts him but he has nobody to share his distress. Nolan is fed up with his absurd life and wants to give it meaning. In jail he read Plato’s Republic and Utopia and Herodotus, Gibbon, Macaulay, Carlyle, Prescott, Spinoza, Hegel, Kant, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer like great thinkers. He joins party because he wants to give meaning to his idle life secondly he wants to take revenge from capitalistic system. But Nilson clarifies to Jim that party doesn’t work according to individual but individual has to work according to the party ideals:

“Look, Jim, I want to give a picture of what it’s like to be a party member.

You’ll get a chance to vote on every decision, but once the vote’s in, you’ll have to obey”.

Here Nilson’s words clearly manifest group ideology. Steinbeck argued that “the Phalanx has emotions of which the unit men are incapable,” so that once he becomes part of “a moving phalanx, his nature changes, his habits and his desires.” p.xvii. With the course of time Nolan too loses his individuality and becomes a thing of use in the group. Mac starts Jim’s elementary training of a party worker. They eat together and share the things like corned beef, carrots, potatoes and raw sliced onions only to inculcate a feeling of importance among party members. As Jim was without “any hope or peacefulness” in life so he was attracted by the conviction of the “Radicals” that “sooner or later they would win their way out of the system they hated”. Jim was “hungry” for aspirations and expectations, has illusion that his father was easily “licked every time” as he was fighting alone but in group it will be different”p.34, simply dragged by the peaceful conviction of the party men. Thus physically they are united but emotionally they are quite apart, which is the essential requirement of humanity.

Main protagonists of the novel, Mac, Jim, Joy, Dakin, London and Anderson all are victims of capitalistic system and suffered humiliation and violence in their life. Mac was licked by the ten people and his mother house was set in fire because in his speech he said, “people are starving”p33. In “Torgas Valley” where apples are ready to be picked the Growers association announces the pay cut of the pickers at time when they reached the valley by spending all their hard earned money. So Mac finds it a good opportunity for instigating the strike and teaching Nolan how to use any material, even human beings, for the party cause. Hardly concerned about the individual’s sufferings and pain his mind is stuffed with strike, party and cause. Steinbeck presents how even human life is a thing of use for them that can be easily staked for making strike a success. Being an expert party leader Mac is adept in the skill, how to be friendly with wage laborers. Holding a pouch of tobacco to Jim he mandates:

“You ought to take up smoking. It’s a nice social habit. You’ll have to talk to a lot of strangers in your time. I don’t know any quicker way to soften a stranger down than to offer him a smoke, or even to ask him for one. And lots of guys feel insulted if they offer you a cigarette and you don’t take it “p. 47

Devoid of compassion and fellow feeling, as an expert party leader, he knows the dos and don’ts of how to use the poor pickers. Drained of any kind of emotion and morality his sole objective is to “use everything we can get hold of” whether it is the child birth, physical injury or death even. Jim too starts transforming in the company of mechanical Mac. When Jim inquires about his sentiment he plainly remarks,” Mostly I’m too damn busy to know how I feel”. He is the product of party ideals and now it is the turn of Jim. Jim puffed up with pride at Mac remarks that, “you’re going to be an asset in any man’s revolution”. Thus according to Steinbeck excessive ambition and unhealthy competition leads to the dehumanization of human beings.

London’s daughter Lisa can’t get a room in the city hospital as she belongs to the labor class, but Mac too uses her as a material. When he comes to know about Lisa’s labour pain, he whispers to himself, “what a break! If I can pull it off, we’re started.” First requirement of any strike is the union of labor class and Lisa do this work for Mac. Although without any training he works as a mid-wife for Lisa, and risks the life of poor girl for the cause of union. When Jim appreciates his efforts and inquires about his medical training, Mac shamelessly remarks:

“we’ve got to use whatever material comes to us. That was a lucky break. We simply had to take it
even if it killed her_ we have got to use anything....we made the men to work for themselves, in their own defense, as a group.....Raising wages isn’t all we’re after. You know all that”.p.66

Above lines clearly states party ideology that human beings are just material to be used and thrown.

Growers have the power of “machine guns” and “troops” to suppress the laborer and party leaders, like Mac know how to use them as material. So trapped in the quagmire of capitalism they are only to be butchered and used. In capitalistic set up laborers are used and thrown when become disabled and old. For strikers too senior and old workers are “waste” and of no use. When Jim talks to Dan about strike and social change, Mac reprimands him saying, “Don’t waste your time on old guys like that. He’s no good. You’ll get yourself converted to hopelessness if you talk to old men”p.79. When old Dan falls from a ladder, immediately, he turns into a useful material for Mac, “The old buzzard was worth something after all ... We can use him now”. As iron is hot, Mac announces strike and appoints Daikin as the leader of the fruit pickers.

Objective of the fruit pickers behind strike is the cut in the wages that announced by the growers when valley is with itinerant labor. At the same time, cotton crops is also ready for picking. So they fear, “they drop the pay after we get here, that’s why! And if we let them by with it, we’ll be worse in the cotton. We’ll get screwed there, too; and you know it damn well.”P.95. All the three Jim, Mac and fruit pickers have different objectives behind organizing. Collectively they are taking an animal form and ready for violence too, “we’ll kill anybody that scabs on us”. Here Steinbeck has vocalized the feelings of individual through the words of one fruit picker as, “I don’t like it...lot of men’ll get hurt. I can’t see no good in it at all. I never yet seen a strike raise wages for long”p.94. Thus Steinbeck’s concern is live able human condition and essential goodness of man, not the party agenda or ideology.

Growers use the power of law, politics, police and machine guns money to control the strike. Strickers too start working in a planned manner like formation of committee and selection of chairman. London makes arrangement of camp and water for the strikers. Doc Burton is appointed as medical health official for the camp. Very cleverly he makes London, although he is a “natural leader”, to choose Daikin as the chairman of the committee. As the strike progresses individuals becomes insignificants, decisions are taken by the majority and everybody have to follow

whether they like it or not. As tension rises, cops warn them of shooting, Mac, inconsiderate of human life, wants it to be happened. His self complacent statement is:

“I wish they would start shooting. This bunch of mugs is going to pieces, maybe, if something dirty doesn’t happen pretty soon. They’re feeling too good. They’ll start fighting themselves.”p.146.

Man is a social being and dependent on the group for his social identity. When group exploit the individual he attempt to save his being this leads to conflict between the two. In Dubious Battle Steinbeck exposed the group ideology of using the individuals for the cause. Mac is a spokesman of Marxian ideology that, “Revolution and Communism will cure social injustice”. Quite opposite, Doc Burton affirms that, strike is a “wound” and group man “gets pleasure when individual men are wiped out in a war” speaks about Humanism as a panacea for all diseases. from the very beginning Mac, a “cold blooded bastard” was sure about the failure of the strike still like a fratricidal he stakes the life of poor fruit pickers only for his party agenda. No doubt Steinbeck highlights the brutal way of growers, use of forces, shot gun, tear gas bombs and guards, but also focus reader’s attention towards the misanthropic design of the strikers. Joy, first offering in the fire of strike, who used to arrange food for the strikers shot dead by one of the growers. But for Mac his death is very soothing as “he’s done the first real, useful thing in his life.” Again use value is more important than human value. Mac uses Joy’s dead body and makes a public funeral in order to excite the strikers:

“We’ve got to take him, I tell you. We’ve got to use him to step our guys up,
to keep ‘em together. This’ll stick ‘em together, this’ll make ‘em fight”.

Second victims are AL and Anderson duo, father and son, are used by the strikers. Anderson lured by the offer of free apple picking by the strikers and they will use his land in return. But, everything, Anderson’s apple store, AL’s lunch wagon has been burnt in the clash of growers and strikers. AL is beaten to death. But Mac, unaffected by all this devastation, simply comments to Doc:

“I can’t take time to think about the feelings of one man?”

Mac said sharply. “I’m too busy with big bunches of men.”p.207

Even Jim Nolon has lost his identity and turned into “a proper son of a bitch” in contrary, Mac finds in him “a good party man”. No doubt, here Steinbeck is speaking about the system that turns man into inhuman. Democratic leadership turns into dictatorship. Jim and Mac find it impossible to run the strike without authority and decide:

“We’re going to create authority,” said Jim. “We’re going to give orders that stick. The men elected you, didn’t they? Now they’ve got to take it whether they like it or not.”(IDB 282)

Daikin, the elected chairman of the strikers, in horror leaves the camp with his family members but caught by the growers. His truck has been burnt he too, is shot in the leg and sent to jail. But Mac has another leader in the form of London.

Line between the growers and strikers has disappeared. Mac becomes Big Brother and London merely reduced to a puppet only to obey the orders. A police committee has been constituted who will beat the guards who will not perform their duties and not be vigilantes. Steinbeck’s major concern is human freedom and individuality. Nobody wants strike. Women in the camp want to go out of this dirty and dingy place. Lisa’s words epitomize common man need:

“I like to have a cow” she said. “I like to have butter an’ cheese like you can make”.

Fruit pickers and labor don’t aspire for bigger things their needs are small and simple which, unfortunately, manipulated by the misanthrope like Mac. Repeatedly he speaks about violence, bloodshed as compulsory element to trigger the mob “a big animal, very different from the men in it”. He waits for the firing from the grower’s side and killing of strikers only to make the mob more violent. Steinbeck has created the characters like Doc Burton as the spokes man of humanity who considers that we can create “a violent thing out of violence” which is quite opposite to Marxist ideology, which favors “revolution”. Jim a spokes man of Marxism again affirms “all great things have violent beginnings”. Steinbeck has beautifully summed up his philosophy of compassion love and brotherhood, in the words of Doc Burton:

“There aren’t any beginnings,” Burton said. “Nor any ends. It seems to me that man has engaged in a blind and fearful struggle out of a past he can’t remember, into a future he can’t for see nor understand. And man has met and defeated every obstacle, every enemy except one. He cannot win over himself. How mankind hates itself” p.259

Doc focuses on particular individuals rather than the group. He has equal sympathy and compassion for all his patient- Old Dan, Lisa and all other. Steinbeck portrayed him as a man helping exploited and victims who are wounded by the malignancy of the “phalanx”.

In conclusion we can say that the book *In Dubious Battle* presents Steinbeck’s ‘concern for human values and interests’. In the words of Timmerman the motif of “freedom and constraint coupled with the dreams of little men that one observes so often in Steinbeck’s fiction is present here too”. So, we can conclude with the words of Steinbeck that,” I’m not interested in strike as means of raising men’s wages, and I’m interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition. But man hates something in himself. He has been able to defeat every natural obstacle but himself he cannot win over unless he kills every individual and this self hate which goes so closely in hand with self love is what I wrote about” (LL,p.98). In short, *In Dubious Battle reaffirms* Steinbeck’s belief that there is “no social stability without individual stability”. Due to the hostile conditions human society, is facing the crisis. Materialism, in-humanization, unhealthy competition, and lose of ethics has shattered the peace and stability in society which resulted in indifference of man towards man and group.

Works cited:

Anderson, George Parker. *Research Guide to American Literature: American Modernism 1914-1945*. New York: Facts on File, 2010. Print.

Fensch, Thomas. *Conversation with John Steinbeck*. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson and London, 1988.

George, Stephen K. Barbara A. Heavilin *John Steinbeck and His Contemporaries* The Scare Crow Press, U.K, 2007.

Levant Howard, *The Novels of Steinbeck: A Critical Study*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974.print

Marx Karl. *Das Capital*. New Delhi: Finger Classic, 2016. Print Marx Karl,

Engels Friedrich. *The Communist Manifesto*. New Delhi: Grapevine India, 2014.print

Meyer Mickael J. *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men*. Lanham: The Scarecrow P, 2009. Print.

Owens, Louis. *John Steinbeck’s Re-Vision of America*. The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1985.

Reeves Thomas C. *Twentieth Century America: A Brief History*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.

Steinbeck, John *In Dubious Battle* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992. Print.

Timmerman, John H. *John Steinbeck's Fiction: Aesthetics Of The Road Taken*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. Print.

