Exploring Feminism In John Steinbeck's East Of Eden


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Abstract: East of Eden, a notably controversial novel by John Steinbeck, has been subject to diverse critical discussions across various approaches since its publication. The extensive range of themes and symbolic elements within the work contributes significantly to its critical acclaim. Steinbeck skillfully challenges universal principles by constructing a world rich with them. This analysis focuses on examining East of Eden through a feminist lens. By exploring key female characters, notably casting Cathy Ames as the embodiment of evil, and scrutinizing the dynamics between male and female characters, the aim is to delve into the novel's prevailing perspective on the expected roles of women in society and family.

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As Li emphasizes, “through his work of fiction and nonfiction, Steinbeck has offered us a broad range of views with which we can reflect on American ethics.” (63) Examining East of Eden without considering the cultural and historical context of its publication date is not a comprehensive study. Despite the novel being set in the past, Steinbeck skillfully weaves in direct and indirect references to the contemporary issues of his time, leaving traces of those events throughout the work.

Amidst the harrowing physical and psychological aftermath of World Wars I and II, and the escalating anxiety of the Cold War, there is a growing inclination among people to seek tranquility. “In reaction to the constant fear caused by the Cold War, many Americans attempted to create a safe environment of their own by having a stable family life,” writes Danielle Woods. After World War II, both men and women in the United States were eager to embrace marriage (3). The aftermath of industrialization and the traumatic experiences of the world wars prompted a return to traditional gender roles in this haven of tranquility. Despite women being integral to the labor market in American industrial society since the 1880s and during World Wars I and II, the post-war era saw a redefinition of women’s roles in society and the home through unspoken rules. The ideal woman was portrayed as a devoted homemaker, fully dedicated to her family in this reconstructed image. “The ideology of “true womanhood” was so deeply ingrained and so useful for preserving societal stability in a time of flux,” writes Estelle B. Freedman, “that those few women who explicitly rejected its inequalities could find little support for their views.” (25)

In this society, women's central objective was marriage and subsequently having children, with a larger family considered virtuous and comforting. Such communities, rooted in profound religious convictions, particularly resonated with these ideals in times of peace, especially among female populations. In her article on the corporeal experience with the mother, Luce Irigaray states:

The maternal function underpins the social order and the order of desire, but it is always kept in a dimension of need. Where desire is concerned, especially in its religious dimension, the role of maternal--
feminine power is often nullified in the satisfying of individual and collective needs. Desire for her, her desire that is what is forbidden by the law of the father, of all fathers: fathers of families, fathers of nations, religious fathers, professor--fathers, doctor--fathers, lover--fathers, etc. (414)

In the postwar culture, having more children was perceived as a pathway to a promising future. Women were categorized primarily as mothers or wives within this established social framework. Those who sought independence and chose to work were often judged as inadequate in their roles as wives and mothers. This perspective on women's rights found consistent reinforcement in the media as an effective means of shaping public opinion during that era. The women's activities in the United States during the 1960s, known as Second-wave feminism, don't seem too far-fetched in this context. It marked a delicate and pivotal period in the implementation of fundamental feminist concepts, rooted in the prevailing attitudes of patriarchal society in the past.

The 1960s, as noted in The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, marked a radical political moment. Despite many women engaging in socialist organizations, they encountered public dismissal of their claims and found themselves relegated to domestic tasks while their male counterparts discussed radical politics. Faced with pressure to revert to a feminine style serving male interests after holding significant roles during the war and disillusioned by communist politics, women felt compelled to unite. Consequently, women's organizations emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, aiming to challenge longstanding practices that suppressed female concerns.

East of Eden unfolds the evolving lives of two families, the Trasks and the Hamiltons, in California's Salinas Valley, providing a realistic portrayal of American culture. Characters like Cathy Ames also called by the name Kate, Liza Hamilton, and Abra Bacon exemplify contrasting personalities, reflecting diverse social strata. Liza Hamilton embodies the role of a devout domestic wife with strong religious convictions, epitomizing traditional values as a dedicated wife and mother. This starkly contrasts with Cathy Ames, portrayed as a morally questionable woman lacking any redeeming qualities, highlighting the stark differences between the two. Introducing Abra Bacon, the author presents a character of moderate disposition, neither strictly traditional nor entirely at odds with societal conventions.

Cathy Ames, the primary source of torment for the Trasks, is a carefree and stunning woman who prioritizes only herself and her desires, even in her role as a mother. The complexity of her character lies in her defiance and departure from conventional femininity. As a wife, she disregards her husband's feelings, and as a mother, she shows indifference toward her newborn children. Her beauty, particularly her physique, takes center stage, portrayed as a potent weapon wielded in a nontraditional manner that challenges conventional ideals of the female body. Susan Bordo notes the following observation:

Our conscious politics, social commitments, strivings for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our bodies—not the craving, instinctual body imagined by Plato, Augustine, and Freud,’ but what Foucault calls the “docile body,” regulated by the norms of cultural life. (2362)

Kate’s beauty is initially described, focusing on her physique and feminine charm. From the beginning, Cathy exuded a childlike appearance with golden, gorgeous hair and hazel eyes that had a drowsy allure due to drooping upper lashes. Her heart-shaped face featured a delicate nose, high cheekbones, and a small, well-shaped mouth resembling a rosebud. Even as an adult, Cathy retained a childlike body with slender arms, tiny hands, and modestly sized breasts. Her figure maintained a boyish quality with narrow hips and straight legs, complemented by small, round feet. Despite her alluringly smooth and tempting voice, Cathy could wield it sharply when needed. From a young age, she possessed a captivating quality, drawing attention whenever she entered a room, leaving people intrigued by something elusive in her eyes. She moved gracefully, leaving an indelible impression on those around her.

This extensive description of Kate’s physical attributes serves dual purposes: firstly, highlighting the significance of her feminine beauty in shaping her identity as an antagonist; and secondly, by referencing her childlike and “boyish” beauty, the author underscores the contradictory facets of her character. Kate, with her seemingly innocent and childlike appearance, skillfully deceives unsuspecting men, exemplified in her interactions with Adam. Her allure grants her the power to obtain anything she desires. When the author intends to portray Kate's repulsive image during her encounter with Adam in the brothel, he writes: “Adam looked down at her hand and saw it wrinkled like a pale monkey's paw. He moved away, revulsion.” (247), Adam becomes
disillusioned not due to Kate's heinous crimes, like shooting him or abandoning infants, but simply by observing her perceived ugliness, shattering the ideal image he had constructed in his mind.

In Steinbeck's unsettling portrayal, the aftermath of sex becomes pivotal in depicting the ominous perception of a woman's body through Kate. Utilizing her intense sexual allure, Kate embodies the dark and lethal facets of femininity in the photograph. Unlike typical women who channel their potent sexuality into childbirth, as suggested by author Liza Hamilton, Kate deviates by not employing her formidable sexual power in the conventional manner. Interestingly, it seems that Kate's aversion to men is not rooted in disdain for sexual encounters; rather, she derives pleasure from the humility she perceives in men. “Unlike other brothels that exist to satisfy men in exchange for cash,” Danielle Woods argues, “Kate uses her house as a means to obtain the power to ruthlessly destroy the lives of numerous men.”(17). When attempting to share with Adam the pictures of the men she has coerced, Kate states:

Look there. That’s a state senator. He thinks he’s going to run for Congress. Look at his fat stomach. He’s got bubs like a woman. He likes whips. That streak there that’s a whip mark. Look at the expression on his face! He’s got a wife and four kids and he’s going to run for Congress. You don’t believe! Look at this! This piece of white blubber is a councilman; this big red Swede has a ranch out near Blanco. Look here! This is a professor at Berkeley. Comes all the way down here to have the toilet splashed in his face - professor of philosophy. And look at this! This is a minister of the Gospel, a little brother of Jesus. He used to burn a house down to get what he wanted. (246)

The source of this humiliation lies in Kate's perceived control over her targets, driven by a fundamental sense of authority. This feeling stems from the unjustifiable anger of men, manifesting as a form of vengeance.

Numerous questions surrounding Kate's character remain unresolved as the novel concludes: What propels her to commit these malevolent deeds? What fuels her deep-seated malevolence? Why does she forsake her children without a trace of maternal or compassionate sentiment? What prompts a seemingly unfeeling mother, distant for years, to suddenly bequeath her fortune to her son? Above all, what motivated the author to craft such a monstrous character in the guise of an attractive woman? Kate's history includes parental murder, shooting Adam, abandoning her sons, engaging in prostitution, poisoning Faye, and extorting clients. Behind these criminal acts, there must be a compelling motive or a significant driving force, yet Kate never articulates her primary motivation or, in other words, her ultimate desires.

Utilizing sharp contrasts, the author paints a chilling portrayal of Kate, juxtaposed with Liza Hamilton—a traditional woman epitomizing the utopian ideal of womanhood. This dichotomy between the "Angelic woman" and the "demonic woman" underscores the distinction between gender and sex, a focal point frequently emphasized by feminist critics. While sex pertains to biology, gender emerges as a socially constructed concept, serving as a tool for classification imposed by societal norms. Throughout history, the criteria for an ideal feminine identity have been meticulously defined to suit the patriarchal society's requirements. Women adhering to these established norms are lauded as "perfect women," while those diverging are labeled as "improper women," deemed unfit for such a societal framework. Liza Hamilton embodies the flawless or angelic woman, standing in stark contrast to Cathy Ames, who personifies the diabolic woman. In their widely recognized article, "The Madwoman in the Attic," Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber articulate:

“… the monster- woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies insinquent female autonomy and thus represents both the author’s power to alloy “his” anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster) and simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained “place “ and thus generates a story that “gets away” from its author.”(156)

In contrast to Kate's active role in her family, Liza Hamilton emerges as a entirely dependent woman. Perpetually pregnant, Liza's confinement to her home aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of restricting maternal duties, confining women to domestic spaces while men, unburdened by such responsibilities, enjoy opportunities for intellectual and educational pursuits. Although Liza's husband, Samuel Hamilton, is portrayed as an intelligent man, Liza's engagement is primarily with the Bible. Her life revolves around domestic tasks and reproduction, and she expects other women to adopt the same role. This is evident in her disapproval of Kate, whom she views as idle and useless due to her perceived lack of skills in sewing, mending, or knitting.

Liza's adherence to traditional practices seems to be deeply rooted in her religious beliefs, where the ideal woman is portrayed as wholeheartedly devoted to her family and entirely submissive. The author skillfully
conveys Liza's religious outlook through descriptions of her appearance and glimpses into her personality. Her hair, consistently pulled back and tightly bunned, reflects a meticulous presentation. Though her attire details escape memory, it can be surmised that it perfectly suited her. Lacking a sense of humor and displaying razor-sharp wit sparingly, she struck fear into her grandchildren due to her seemingly flawless nature. Approaching life boldly and without complaint, she believed this aligned with her understanding of how God intended everyone to live, anticipating rewards in the future.

We witness a steadfast woman who remains unwavering in her strict religious convictions, steadfast even in the face of profound misfortunes like the loss of a child. In her perspective, all such calamities are manifestations of God's will, and the duty of devout servants involves exercising patience and obedience. Within this mindset, a woman is perceived as a subordinate being, primarily tasked with reproduction. Additionally, it seems that amid her considerable household duties, Liza has eclipsed her feminine identity; she is portrayed solely as a devoted mother and capable wife, with her feminine attributes largely overlooked.

Adam Trask, a gentle and affectionate man deeply in love with Kate, remains in profound shock and its lingering aftermath after her prolonged abandonment. He serves as a contrasting element in the narrative, accentuating Kate's malicious characteristics, with the writer heightening the impact of her nefarious deeds by portraying him as such a kind-hearted man. “Young Adam was always an obedient child. Something in him shrank from violence, from contention, from the silent shrieking tensions that can rip at a house.” (21)

Male authors, scrutinizing feminine experiences solely through a critical and reproachful patriarchal perspective, project stereotypical views of women, encompassing their desires, needs, feelings, internal and external conflicts, psychological states, and feminine identity in the novel. Through the portrayal of three representative women, each grappling with a loss of their authentic feminine identity, the author's misguided attitude and inaccurate depiction contribute to this distortion.

The novel highlights the pervasive impact of a patriarchal lens on how women are portrayed, with the author's viewpoint shaping the depiction of varied feminine experiences. The three women in the narrative become vehicles for examining the repercussions of an misguided attitude towards women, leading to the erosion of their genuine feminine identities. As readers navigate the intricate tapestry of desires, conflicts, and emotions interwoven in the plot, it encourages contemplation on the broader consequences of how male authors mold and influence societal perceptions of women. This narrative serves as a compelling yet sobering reminder of the imperative for nuanced and fair representations of female characters in literature.

Works Cited: