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Interpersonal Relationship between Man and Nature in John Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown*

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Abstract

It is an undisputed truth that man is part of Nature and not the reverse. The history of any literature in the world begins with man – Nature relationship. In all writings of different phases of civilization through the ages, whether it is an essential part of a work of art or an embellishment of descriptive component, Nature has often been resorted to for comparisons and contrasts between the human temperaments and the seasonal temperaments of the omnipotent Nature. Man appears to have conquered Nature but it has been proved beyond doubt that Nature is invincible.

Keywords

John Steinbeck; *To a God Unknown*; Interpersonal Relationship; God-Man Relationship; Nature.

Nature finds its way into great works of literature and sometimes it forms one of the characters of a novel as in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* or a formidable background to the action of a drama as in *King Lear*. So it is not natural that a writer of international repute, John Steinbeck who has given us fiction of

timeless nature, has incorporated Nature as an inseparable part of his fictional universe.

John Steinbeck's interest in ecology and marine biology finds profound expression in most of his novels written before the 1940s. Steinbeck, says Inou, depicts the world in his novels according to his "ecological view" and "his writing style is highly naturalistic. That is because men are included in the ecological whole where they cannot be self-assertive, and the whole world does not yield the personal Edenic perfection" (45). According to McCarthy, California, which forms the setting of Steinbeck's early novels, "… is a factor in shaping the dominant themes" in Steinbeck's fiction, "including man's relationship with the land" (26). As McCarthy's remarks reveal, the readers can easily imagine that "Californian nature had a deep influence on Steinbeck, and led him to develop his peculiar ecological view of the world" (26)

The protagonist of his early novel *To a God Unknown* (1933), Joseph Wayne, is 'the son of the soil' in the real sense of the phrase. He is "a quasi-believer in animism and a priest or god of fertility in nature" (Levant 23). He cannot brook barrenness and he identifies his dead father with the giant oak tree at the centre of the ranch with which he converses as if it were a living being. His ultimate sacrifice for rain in order to save all beings on the ranch is the culmination of his deep interest in ecology.

To a God Unknown opens with Joseph Wayne living on a farm near Pittsford in Vermont. His elder brothers Thomas and Burton are married and his younger brother Benjamin, known as 'Benjy', will be married when spring comes. Joseph feels "there won't be enough land now. I have a hunger for land of my own," he tells his father (2). His youngest brother Benjy has never been dependable. The old Wayne could see something more in Joseph than in his brothers. To him, Joseph is "more sure and inward" and so he has always intended his blessings for Joseph. He expects Joseph to take his own place in the family hierarchy (2).

Permitting Joseph to go to California for homesteading, the old father blesses him in the traditional manner. In the words of Lisca, "Although he is not

the eldest son, it is Joseph who receives the patriarchal blessing, and in the old manner placing his hand between his father's thighs" (*Wide World* 43). We may regard this as a sort of spiritual guidance. After offering his benediction, the old man says that he will go with Joseph in a year or two. If Joseph loses a cow, the old man could help him to find her, "being up in the air" and he "could see things far away" (3). That Joseph leaves Pittsford in search of new land to farm is a condition of isolation from the collective membership - from dependence to independence and his own journey of life begins (Prabhakar 84-85). *To a God Unknown* easily evidences "Steinbeck's view of man as a religious creature, but more important in the novel is the nature of the individual's search for an answer to the question, "Who is the God to Whom we shall offer our sacrifice" (Marks 36).

As soon as Joseph arrives in the lush Nuestra Senora Valley, his feeling for the land "begins to take on a symbolic meaning" (Lisca, *Wide World* 44). He feels that this "land might possess all of him if he were not careful. To combat the land a little, he thought of his father, of the calm and peace, the strength and eternal rightness of his father, and then in his thought the difference ended, he knew that there was no quarrel, for his father and this new land were one" (5).

In *To a God Unknown*, as Ferrell says, "Steinbeck's central character was Joseph Wayne.... The land was as central a character to the novel as was Joseph Wayne" (69). In fact, the relationship between Joseph Wayne and the land acquires new dimensions. Joseph feels that his body is filled with the hot fluid of love. He is in love with his newly acquired land and a kind of inexplicable and mysterious kinship blooms between them, as his age would have it now, he even feels like copulating with the land.

Joseph considers everything as an extension of his being. "This is mine," he says simply. There is pity in him for the grass and the flowers; he feels that the trees are his children and the land his child that he "must take care of it." "For a moment, the land has been his wife. His fingers gripped the wet grass and

tore it out, and gripped again. His thighs beat heavily on the earth" (8). This symbolic copulation with the earth marks his becoming part of the soil, which is a symbol of eternity. "Joseph Wayne's love of land is at once practical, religious, and sexual" (Ferrell 69).

After his symbolic copulation with the soil, Joseph realizes that he must channel his demonic sexual energy into a socially acceptable symbol. He feels that he needs a wife, for otherwise it will be too lonely in the valley. Thus, his desire for land and a wife reveals that he passes through the first two objects of life: *Kama* and *Artha.* Material possession and conjugal love fulfil physical and emotional needs. However, one of the immediate needs is establishing order and building a house on the farm. He builds his house near a giant oak tree, which stretches its protecting arm over the roof. Soon, a letter from Burton reveals the death of his father whose last wish was to "see Joseph's new land… but there was no sadness in him [Joseph]" (16).

That Joseph loves the land so intensely is evident from his symbolic copulation with it. The temporal body quenches its physical thirst, and this physical gratification holds Joseph tight now. Hence, he becomes inseparable from it. He also believes that "his father and the new land were one" (5). He experiences a feeling of joy and welcome. "He heard the sounds come back to the land." The great oak tree stirs to life. When Joseph looks at the tree, his eyes shine with recognition and understanding, "for his father's strong and simple being, which had dwelt in his youth like a cloud of peace, had entered the tree" (17). He talks to the tree softly, "I'm glad you've come, sir. I didn't know until now how lonely I have been for you" (17). The tree stirs as if it were responding. He feels that his father's spirit is staying in the tree. "He stood up, walked to the old tree, and kissed its bark" (17). He is not sorry about his father's death, for he says, "because my father is here" (17). He tells Juanito, "My father is in the tree. My father is that tree." He says further, "…this land is full of ghosts [which]… are weak shadows of reality" (17). Juanito also declares: "…the earth is our mother and how everything that lives has life from the mother and goes back into the mother" (18). The giant oak tree, Joseph feels, thus symbolizes his

dead father and is a faithful guide and companion in shaping his character. Through the character of Joseph, Steinbeck "portrays the growth of an individual from narrow egoism to gradual stages of expanding altruism. What started with Joseph Wayne as an individual dream to try to buy a land of his own, finally evolves into a dream of community of which he offers himself as a supreme sacrifice" towards the end of the novel (Prabhakar 84-5). Joseph thus moves from selfishness to selflessness, from 'I' to 'We'.

Thomas, Joseph's eldest brother, is "too much an animal himself to be sentimental" (19). Though he understands animals, he neither understands nor trusts human beings very much. He establishes a "strong kinship" with animals and is satisfied with the immediate pleasures of life (19). Unlike his younger brothers Burton and Benjy, Thomas lives in the proximity of nature.

Joseph builds his house under "the protecting limb of an oak tree" and invites his brothers to come and live him on the ranch (Lisca, Wide World 44). There are two settings in *To a God Unknown* - the focal points around which all activities take place. They are the giant oak tree at the centre of the farm and the moss-covered rock near the open glade in the pine grove. All these have ritualistic association at the physical level leading to the spiritual and moral levels. The divinity and sanctity of the place is indelibly imprinted in Joseph's mind and he tells his brother Thomas, "When we have a need, we'll go back again and be fed" (30). After courting Elizabeth, a school teacher, whom he is going to marry soon, Joseph wants to go to this place to sit by the rock and stroke the soft moss on it. He thinks, "It would be a place to run to, away from pain or sorrow or disappointment or fear… there's need to lose some plaguing thing, that will be the place to go" (39). This pine grove appears to Joseph as a shrine at which he can get salvation and freedom from the temporal frame. There is an aura of sacredness around that place enhancing the spiritual aspects of divinity, descending and manifesting in rocks and trees. Joseph's spiritual strength lies in that hallowed spot and he has identified it as a place of self-sacrifice and Self-Realization. He remembers that peace reigns in the glade. Even before her marriage to Joseph, Elizabeth finds some remedy for her homesickness in that

place. Joseph, who believes that the oak tree is his father, allows Elizabeth to sit in the crotch of the tree. He tells her that the tree loves her. Probably, Joseph has shown his bride to the tree to get the approval and blessing of his father's spirit. This shows the apparent compatibility of temperament between Joseph and Elizabeth.

On the New Year's Day, Joseph holds a fiesta on a grand scale for rain. It begins with a Catholic Mass held by Father Angelo from the town of Nuestra Senora. As part of the ritual, Joseph pours a little wine on the bark of the oak tree to the shock of his second brother Burton. Father Angelo too does not approve of Joseph's pagan worship. Then, Joseph, keenly watching the fierce bucolic dancing and the noisy merriment of the participants, says, "We have found something here, all of us.... In some way, we've come closer to the earth for a moment" (88). Having become selfless in his dealings, Joseph now appears to have come closer to God. The earth is identified as a physical manifestation of spirituality and Joseph stands on the threshold of self-realization. He has understood the truth: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" and he is now ready to seek reunion with the Creator (Gen. 3.19). Such a reunion demands selfless service, universal brotherhood, and at times self-sacrifice as well.

The fiesta is, no doubt, a powerful prayer and Joseph says, "It will bring the rain. Something must happen when such a charge of prayer is let loose" (88). Soon it rains heavily. He learns about the good news that his wife Elizabeth is pregnant. Joseph always derives happiness from the joy of others. Burton, who can never feel happy in spite of his immense faith in religion and his grotesque puritanical morality, is in the grip of insular prejudice and mindless fanaticism with which he wantonly decimates his catholicity, his senses, and faculty of reasoning. He considers the fiesta as "devil worship" (88). He declares that he will not allow the Pope on the farm. Burton means that Joseph should not have invited the Catholic priest, Father Angelo to hold a mass. Joseph is a pantheist, "... worshipping nature and finding all things to be holy; He also presumes a

patriarchal role in the family and extends this role to the entire valley, feeling responsible for all the people – perhaps an Abraham" (Milton 329).

But for Joseph, the tree is his immediate prop, his inspiration, and his guiding spirit, which leads him on the right path. Joseph loves the oak tree and talks to it, for it is "a fine tree… a perfect tree," (102) and calls it "Sir," as though it were a human being that too, a venerable human. He tells his wife Elizabeth how his father had died wanting to come to the West. He says, "[The tree]… gives me a feeling that I have my father" (102).

Immediately after Elizabeth delivers a boy baby, Joseph goes to the oak tree and reports the birth of the child. "You are the cycle," says Joseph, "and the cycle is too cruel" (107). Now he is very much perturbed about the oppressing drought. Thus, the cycle has in it alternating joy and sorrow just as childbirth and drought present the whole of the cycle in life.

Later, he initiates his son John by putting him in the crotch of the tree with the belief that "it would not let him fall" (110). This pagan act of Joseph angers Burton who says that his brother's act will "let evil in" (111). He tells Joseph, "You are opening the door to evil. A thing like this will not go unpunished" (111). Joseph denies Burton's charge and his reply infuriates his puritanical brother. The next day, Burton leaves for Pacific Grove with his family for good. Joseph tells him "We will miss you, Burton. It will cut the strength of the family" (114). Burton "represents a sort of joyless Puritanism, and his narrow vision in damning those who find moral good through their senses and in the physical world, makes him Joseph's spiritual and intellectual antagonist" (Lisca, *Wide World* 40-41). Ironically, before leaving for his destination, Burton girdles the tree. By doing so, he has cut off Joseph's strength. He has killed the tree of life. What Joseph considered as an ambassador between him and the land is dead. It is palpably evident that "Joseph represents natural religion as opposed to the ascetic Christianity of his brother Burton" (Fontenrose 17).

After Burton's departure, the tree looks pale and lifeless. Joseph feels that Burton's sudden exit has split the family. Stroking gently the cold bark of the tree, Joseph says, "The tree is dead. There is no life in my tree" (118). He feels

as though he has lost everything in life. When he learns that Burton only has caused the death of the tree, he speaks without any sense of vindictiveness, "He will punish himself. I have no punishments" (119). Even the news about the death of his father did not plunge Joseph in sorrow. But the death of the tree fills Joseph with immense sorrow and pain. His father's death was no death, because his father was the tree. In the death of his tree, he has lost his father. Now he is convinced that "his father's spirit has gone to reside in the great moss-covered rock in the middle of the pine grove, and to this rock" he is going to perform "his oblations and ultimate sacrifice" (Lisca, Wide World 45).

Meanwhile, Elizabeth wants to go to the pine grove to "scotch the rock" (127). She says that she loved the rock more than her husband or the baby. Since the rock frightened her in her dreams, when she was pregnant, she wants to punish it now so that there will not be any more dreams about it. During her previous visit she felt, "I was the rock… the rock was the strongest thing in the world" (123). Joseph is united to Elizabeth not only in marriage, but also "in their mystical experience." The mystical experience of Joseph is not the solitary case of a maniac, but an experience adequately shared by his wife Elizabeth (Chadha 36). For Elizabeth, the mystical visions are "an admixture of vagueness, awe, holiness and half-realization of some spiritual experience"; for Joseph, "they are a key to the meaning of life" revealing the mystery of spiritual truth (Chadha 37).

Now Joseph has to look for another source to depend on for his strength. Looking-up to the pine grove, he thinks, "I must go there soon. I'll be needing the sweetness and strength of the place" (119). He is further worried about the drought.

Joseph wants to see that life goes on unperturbed on earth and he is ready for any kind of sacrifice to see it through. Famine should give place to abundance and sterility to fertility. The lifeline of earthly activities is water; it is the water of life. At any cost, the earth should not be deprived of water. So Joseph meditates to bring down water to the starved earth for its sustenance and survival. It is not that water comes down to earth, but the rain of salvation and grace comes down to Joseph. Joseph's sacrifice is rewarded and in essence, he has crucified

himself for the farm and its people and symbolically the Universe. Joseph makes himself free and available to everyone who looks upon him as a saviour. The 'I' in him becomes 'We'.

On seeing the little stream that issues from a cave in the mossy rock, Joseph says that the land is not yet dead, for the flowing stream is "like a vein still pumping blood" (127). Joseph pins his hope on the holy rock to save the land. Elizabeth, while climbing on the rock falls down dead, quite unexpectedly. "It was too simple, too easy, too quick.... All the stories, all the incidents that made life were stopped without any meaning" (128). He wants to cry out in order to give vent to his personal pain before he is cut off, having lost his feeling of sorrow and resentment. "It was the one chance to communicate," he says but now it's gone. It starts raining. The vibration of life that embraces the land is quite visible. Stroking the rock gently, Joseph says, "Now you are here. Now I will know where I must come.... Dear earth, dear land" (129). Once when Joseph poured a pig's blood on the oak tree, it started raining. Now Elizabeth's sacrifice also brings rain.

Joseph has unmistakably understood the mystery shrouding the rock, for the "forces gather and centre and become one and strong" (130). The divine rock is the centre, which Joseph wants to join. He reveals his understanding that "There is some cycle here, steady and quick and unchangeable as a flywheel" (131). Now a new bond has tied him to the earth and the land has been closer to him. He feels, "Everything seems to work with a recurring rhythm except human life. There is only one birth and one death" (134).

As the drought has already become severe and hostile, Thomas leaves the ranch with his family and the farm animals. Joseph gives away his child John to the permanent care and charge of Rama and swears, "He is yours forever. I have no more claims on him" (155). After this, he quickly turns to the pine grove, as if for an answer. He avers, "The land is struck... not dead, but it is sinking under a force too strong for it. And I am staying to protect the land" (155). Joseph believes to be the saviour to protect the land. His staying alone in the ranch after sending his people and farm animals away to the coastal region serves two

purposes: that Joseph is able to give up his claim on his son by snapping his last attachment and that he continues to remain in the ranch which is a place of peace and hope. It is as if choosing the place to sit in meditation invoking the rain god for the benefit of humanity. Now he has lost touch with all worldly ties, the last of them being his young son John. His kinship with the land and the pine grove is purely a spiritual relationship, the last step in his quest for the Absolute.

In his lonely battle to tackle the severity of the drought situation after the departure of all the members of his family, Joseph willingly resigns himself to the forces of nature and thus prepares the spadework for his reunion with the unknown. He spells it out earlier: "the forces gather and center and become one and strong" (129). After discarding the ephemeral, Joseph, "knew the rock no longer as a thing separated from him. He had no more feeling of affection for it than he had for his own body. He protected it against death as he would have saved his own life" (158). The rock is the centre of the earth; the green moss on the rock is the lifeline to the land. It is his responsibility and bounden duty to keep the moss alive to save the land. He should protect it against death, as he would have saved his own life. "Here it is safe," he thinks. "Here is the seed that will stay alive until the rain comes again. This is the heart of the land, and the heart is still beating" (158-59). Thus, Joseph is the land as well as the rain to sustain life on earth.

Ed Ricketts, a marine biologist and life-long friend of Steinbeck, had a major influence on the latter and his art that enabled him to develop his theories "in which human nature was seen as fundamentally organismic, that is, as being comprehensible only when viewed in the contexts of its place in the organismic scheme of things" (Ditsky 6). This view of Steinbeck can be seen in his protagonist Joseph Wayne also. In *Sea of Cortez* (1941), Steinbeck wrote eloquently of "man's physical (ecology) and spiritual (mysticism) necessity to relate 'the whole thing' from the tide pool to the star" (Lisca, *Teaching Steinbeck* 2).

The transformation of Steinbeck's protagonist, Joseph is in the extreme, for he has moved to the glade to reside there, leaving behind him his dynastic ranch, perhaps, parting with the last of his attachments. He has been staying near the rock for weeks together. He tells Juanito who has come back after his self-imposed exile: "Listen, Juanito, first there was the land, and then I came to watch over the land; and now the land is nearly dead. Only this rock and I remain. I am the land" (164). Joseph also tells him, "I will stay, until I am dead. And when that happens, nothing will be left" (166). He feels: "only this rock and I remain. I am the land" (180). He remembers the story that Elizabeth told him of a man (in some mythology), who ran away from the old Fates and clung to an altar where he was safe. Like that man, who probably stands for Markandeya clinging to the *linga*, praying to Lord Shiva, in Indian mythology (Sundararaman 149-50), Joseph clings to the rock, which in Satyanarayana's view is the stone image of Lord Shiva (*linga*) of the Hindu pantheon (98). When Joseph is in deep sleep, he appears to Juanito like the "crucified Christ hanging on His cross, dead and stained with blood". Juanito "crosses himself" and walks to Joseph's bed (168). This scene is symbolic of Joseph's impending 'crucifixion' for the 'redemption' of the land as well all the living beings there.

In Burton's view, Joseph, a worshipper of Nature, is a pagan. However, he along with Juanito goes to meet the Catholic priest, Father Angelo at Nuestra Senora. Joseph is ready to do anything for the sake of rain. He requests the priest to pray for rain but the priest tells him that already they have held a Mass for rain. He dispels Joseph's fear that the land is dying. The priest wants to pray for the soul of Joseph and asks him to get into the church. But Joseph, not consoled, feels betrayed, and bursts out: "To Hell with my soul! I tell you the land is dying! Pray for the land," and leaves the priest. When the priest also fails to help him, Joseph wants to go back to the rock and wait. After his departure, Father Angelo, in sympathy, prays for Joseph's soul, because there is "too much pain in him." For a moment, Father Angelo sees the "Christ-like" figure of Joseph in his mind, but a Christ with "no message" (172).

Leaving Juanito behind, Joseph reaches the pine grove alone and to his consternation, the moss on the rock is stark dry. Now, he remembers the little old man, who, in a way, is his Guru. In the fashion of his Guru, he sacrifices a lanky calf, but nothing happens. He understands: "His secret was for him… it won't work for me" and questions his self, "I am all alone… why should I stay in this dead place?" (179). Milton states that the novel, *To a God Unknown*

> reflects an old pagan view which once had validity and which still reaches us through the unconscious, perhaps as a warning that if the twentieth-century man loses touch with the earth, his intellectual enlightenment, his organized religions, and his technology will not save him. Joseph has found his own kind of Salvation, his own sense of what is right and good, through ultimate self-sacrifice, giving his own life for that of many lives in the valley. (320-21)

That Joseph identifies himself with the rock divulges the fact: "The rock and the old man are one – divine, the guru is god" (Satyanarayana 99). Animal sacrifice and other types of sacrifices will not suffice, so something more precious than all this is demanded of Joseph to realize his goal. After a few attempts by Joseph, truth ultimately dawns upon him that he must obliterate himself, that is his physical identity, and become one with the Unknown. This leads to his "discovery of the identity of himself and the Universe" of which the rock is a part (Kallapur 18). The Hindus follow many forms of idol worship like the worship of *Linga* representing Lord Shiva. Therefore, the rock symbolizes the Absolute. Only in such an invisible reunion, the true self realizes the immense presence of the Absolute and one's life mission is complete for which the Indian philosophy bears evidence (Aurobindo, *Essays* 10).

Joseph's obsession with the land drives him to the point of offering sacrifices to the unknown god. Consequent on his resolution to sacrifice his life, Joseph cuts open the vessels of his wrist, and releases his blood. Lying on his side, with his wrist outstretched, he looks down the long black mountain range of his body. Then, his body grows huge and light, rises into the sky, and out of

it comes the streaking rain. He whispers, "I should have known, … I am the rain" (179). It starts raining heavily. The hills grow dark with moisture. Joseph cries "I am the land… and I am the rain… the grass will grow out of me in a little while" and dies (179). In Inoue's opinion, Joseph " abolishes the frame of his own subject to realize his very place in nature" (41), Inoue further assets that when Joseph "discards his own self-assertive attitude in regard to the land, he suddenly comes to perceive his position in the transcendental ecological whole, and at once, identifies with it" (42). Through his final sacrifice, Joseph has attained *Self-Realization* and saved the land. According to Fontenrose, "Joseph's sacrifice was prefigured in the daily sacrifice made to the setting sun by a strange old man on the coast who claimed to be 'the last man in the Western World to see the sun'" (17).

Joseph is always serene. Burton, who killed the giant oak tree, or Juanito, who killed Benjy, had no punishment from Joseph. He cared for the commonweal of all the living beings on the ranch and in the Valley of Nuestra Senora. This is evident from the spiritual evolution of Joseph's character. The inevitable physical needs like a wife, child and material possession and so on were secondary to Joseph for the "desire for wealth and power can corrupt a man's soul and eventually subdue the glowing vitality of his spirit" (Simmonds 4). The entire creation is saturated with divine love. Hence, just as the Supreme Being, the embodiment of love, showers love on humanity, man too should share this gift given to him with others. But man conditions his love by associating it with worldly relations and wastes his life. Mere physical ties cannot be called love in the true sense of the term. A sincere and real devotee of God will exhibit this rare quality and serve mankind without expecting anything in return.

There are many "descriptions of predatory activity" in the novel; but "they do not suggest that nature is evil." Instead, they "remind man of the great fecundity and enduring pattern of that nature of which he is a part and which is a part of him. They remind him of the undeniable biological heritage which is a factor in his most intellectual pursuits" (Lisca, Wide World 54-55).

Joseph merges with the land when he says, "I am the land" (179). Adhikari opines, "This complete identification with the land is significant as land plays an important role in man's life. This identification further brings out the mystical relationship between man and land" (22). The land is a symbol of eternity through which he realizes the rainfall and through this realization, he identifies himself with the *Paramatma* (the Supreme Being). His self-sacrifice on the rock is the culmination of his avowed goal. According to Marks, "Joseph's "kinship" … is with the land", and "his ultimate sacrifice is to his symbol for its "heart" (the rock), and to his "bloodstream" (the spring), in the glade" (39). He frees his soul from the perishable shell, the body and paves the way for his soul's union with God. He is not for himself and the world is not for him alone; he does not belong to the temporal abode, but he is equipped with the capacity for discharging his duties and responsibilities like a man who has detached himself from the tangible but short-lived one. He identifies the rain as the descent of the Absolute and its arrival on the earth marks the release of his eternal soul from the body. He sacrifices himself, not to perpetuate himself but to perpetuate life on earth by bringing down the life-giving water, the water of life.

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