

# RECLAIMING AGENCY IN A PATRIARCHAL FICTION: JUANA AS THE VOICE OF WISDOM AND RESOLUTION IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE PEARL*

Imdad Ullah Khan\*

Saira Asghar Khan<sup>†</sup>

Akbar Ali<sup>‡</sup>

## Abstract

*Since the publication of his first novel "Cup of Gold", the fictional production of John Steinbeck has remained in focus for literary critics for its diminishing and essentialist portrayal of female characters. His female characters often lack fully developed three-dimensional personalities and remain subservient to the desire and plans of the male characters. Glaring schematic differences between male and female characters in his fiction have led some scholars to charge him of misogyny. However, in his novella "The Pearl", Steinbeck portrays Juana more sympathetically, although not completely judiciously, as a female character who shows resolution, resourcefulness, wisdom, and foresight par excellence in comparison to her short-sighted and impulsive husband Kino. The present paper analyzes key positive characteristics of Juana that give her a superior role in the novel despite her silence during most of the narrative. These qualities redeem her humanity as a female in a patriarchal postcolonial world where women are mostly seen as lacking in several human traits and are thus relegated to an inferior subjugated position. Using qualitative thematic analysis, the current article argues that contrary to critical claims about Juana being a stereotyped female character who plays a marginalized character in the novella, her character has a more dominant role in the narrative and has better agency as compared to female characters in other fictional works of Steinbeck.*

**Keyword:** *Misogyny, Sexism, Female Characters, Novella, Reclaiming Humanity, Patriarchal Society, Postcolonial World.*

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\* Department of English, University of Swat, Pakistan, Email: imdad.khan@uswat.edu.pk

<sup>†</sup> Fatima Jinnah Women University, Pakistan.

<sup>‡</sup> Department of English, FATA University, FR Kohat, Pakistan

## INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck, along with some of his contemporaries like William Faulkner and Ernest Hemmingway, has been often accused by literary critics of sexist writing. Critics argue that in their fictional worlds these novelists fail to portray wholesome three-dimensional female characters (Meyer, 2004). That these authors don't come to terms with the otherness of the female and are unable to accommodate them into their fiction as fully developed complex human beings (Jewell, 2000). In the case of Steinbeck (1902-1968), women are often portrayed in stereotypical roles subservient to the male characters. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962 for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humor and keen social perception. However, even in his highly acclaimed works such as *Of Mice and Men* (1937), the only female character is Curley's wife who is not even named in the novel but portrayed as the wife of a man to whom she belongs like a piece of property. In his other notable novels like *Cup of Gold* (1929) and *Cannery Row* (1945), stereotypical treatment of female characters has been pointed out as a significant flaw in the works of Steinbeck (George, 2005). Due to these characteristics of his fictional world, Steinbeck has been accused of misogynistic and sexist approaches toward his female characters (Hart, 2004).

However, in the literary canon of John Steinbeck, Juana's character in *The Pearl* stands out as significantly different from his other female characters. Juana is quite a strong character in the narrative texture of this novella despite Kino being a macho hero who is often coercive and domineering toward her. Juana can break female stereotypical character by being resolute and resourceful in times of crisis for her family. On such occasions, she also displays wisdom and foresight—qualities that Kino lacks significantly. Although she often remains obedient and subservient in a patriarchal society, when Juana chooses to impose her will upon Kino, he can do little else except follow her directions. The novella was first published in

1943 in a women's magazine called *Women's Home Companion*. It was initially titled "The Pearl of the World" before its publication as a book in 1947. This is arguably a reason for Steinbeck's sympathetic portrayal of Juana as a woman. Juana maintains a dual role as a dominant woman under normal situations and as a dominant woman when the family is in crisis when Kino needs her resolute decisions, wisdom, and foresight. From the time Coyotito is stung by a scorpion to the very end when Kino and Juana walk side by side to the beach to throw the pearl back into the sea, Juana remains a strong companion for Kino upon whose advice he falls back during key moments of crisis.

In spite of her key role as a female companion to the male protagonist of the novella, Juana's character is rarely appreciated for her role in the story. Whereas Kino is often regarded as the sole protagonist of the story, Juana is often considered as a merely supportive character for Kino (Barker, 1995). Her thoughts and actions are not given as much importance as that of her husband who is often considered as the most important figure in the novella who drives the plot of the story. The current paper argues that Juana not only plays a supportive character as a wife but she also drives the plot of the story in significant ways. Her resolution and resourcefulness are strong support for Kino who is often irresolute in moments of crisis in the story. Similarly, her wisdom and foresight are significant in the narrative although Kino often ignores them and leads his family into disasters. The paper analyzes those moments in the story when Juana shows the above qualities and analyzes the impact of her thoughts and decisions upon the course of events in the story. The paper, thus, argues that Juana's character needs more sympathetic attention from readers and critics as "the other hero of *The Pearl*" (Barker, 1995, p. 113).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Theoretical framing

This paper draws on thematic analysis (TA) to make sense of the data. TA is a qualitative data analysis approach that historically emerged from content analysis (Joffe, 2012). With the influential publications of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013), TA has emerged as a theoretically flexible analytical approach that can be adapted for various qualitative analyses dealing with small and large scale data. TA is different from micro-level discourse analysis and content analysis in that it focuses more on broader themes rather than close textual analysis at the lexical, syntactical, and clause levels. It does not, therefore, emphasize technical analysis of language use at the grammatical and syntactical levels (Block, 2010). Braun and Clarke (2006) explain:

TA is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning across a data set. Through focusing on meaning across a data set, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. Identifying unique and idiosyncratic meanings and experiences found only within a single data item is not the focus of TA. This method, then, is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities. (p. 57)

In line with this analytical procedure, the focus of analysis in the present study is not on a microanalysis of language use and its relation to gender construction in the novella. Rather, the analysis is focused on broader thematic clusters emerging from the data. Following Braun and Clarke's six phases of analysis in TA, data analysis phases in the present paper included: familiarization with the data→ initial coding→ categorizing themes→ reviewing themes→ defining and refining themes→ linking themes into

theoretical framework. However, these phases were not implemented in a linear fashion but in an iterative and recursive manner. As our understanding of the data developed, the researchers went back and forth in the data several times to revisit earlier stages in the coding process and to modify, revise, and refine the coding and analysis.

In terms of analytical approach, thematic patterns within the data can be identified either inductively (bottom up) or through a theoretically-oriented deductive (top down) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83-84). Among these two, the former form of TA bears some similarity to Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) as the themes are assumed to emerge from the data themselves. Also, like Grounded Theory, the analysis is not driven by the researcher's theoretical interest and background knowledge. By contrast, the deductive (top down) approach in TA is explicitly analyst driven and theory oriented. Often, the analysis is focused on specific aspects of the data while a rich description of the whole data is lacking. In this study, our analytical approach aligns more with inductive thematic analysis as it builds on a close thematic analysis of the text. However, the deductive aspects of analysis are also important. As Braun and Clarke (2006) state: "It is important to note that researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum" (p. 84). As social and gendered beings, the researchers' subjectivities are implicated in the analytical process and gender roles seen in *The Pearl*.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in the current paper is based on a thematic textual analysis of key excerpts from the text of the novella *The Pearl*. The analysis focuses on two aspects of Juana's character: her resolution and resourcefulness; her wisdom and foresight. Key relevant passages from the novella are carefully analyzed to understand how

the text represents these qualities of Juana and what authorial stance is adopted toward Juana as a female in comparison to her male companion Kino. For Braun and Clarke (2013), thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning found in the data. A close reading of the text for thematic analysis, therefore, entails identifying patterns of recurrent meaning at a higher level as compared to analysis of texts at the syntactical or lexical levels. In the following analysis, selected excerpts from the novella will be analyzed in terms of gender representation and character portrayal to understand gender dynamics as they work in the narrative texture of *The Pearl*.

### **Data Source**

The primary source of data is the text of the novella *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck. Although several digital versions of the novella are now available along with audiobooks, the current paper uses the Penguin (1994) edition of the text for consistency. Secondary data used for analysis include other fictional works of Steinbeck and his contemporaries William Faulkner and Ernest Hemmingway.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Among Steinbeck's female fictional characters, Juana has been critically acclaimed as the most striking and strong character thanks to her role in the novella *The Pearl*. Although the overt protagonist of the novella is Juana's husband Kino who is a man of action and the narrative often revolves around his actions, decisions, and their consequences, Juana's character assume a prominent presence in the story as a strong person who drives Kino's action most of the times. Although her role is often subservient and characterized by almost dog-like loyalty to her husband, in moments of acute crisis Kino fails to judge the situation properly and has to fall back on his wife's advice. For such reasons, some critics consider both Kino and Juana as the two protagonists of the narrative (Meyer, 2004) and Juana as

“the other hero of *The Pearl*” (Barker, 1195, p. 113). In the following lines, I consider three redeeming aspects of Juana’s character that make her more than a mere puppet character that follows Kino’s decisions and commands.

### **Juana’s Resolution and Resourcefulness**

Juana is a mother and a wife in the story and she performs both roles with a dutiful obligation. She takes good care of her baby and runs the household in a non-complaining manner. She usually sacrifices her personal opinion in favor of her husband’s commands. In these aspects, she represents a stereotypical domesticated woman who is a stock female character living in colonial patriarchal society. She has little individuality to present a three-dimensional character. However, in times of testing tensions, Juana is quick to rise to the occasion and assert her individuality against the impulsive and often naïve decisions of her husband. When she sees a scorpion moving toward Coyotito, her firstborn child, Juana invokes both pagan and Christian gods to protect her child from harm. When Coyotito is stung by the scorpion, Kino is enraged because of the misfortune that has befallen upon the family but also because he failed to stop it from happening. In his rage, he howls and squashes the scorpion between his fingers then beats it into the ground with his fist. While Kino is engaged in assuaging his anger, Juana maintains her calm, picks up the baby, and sucks out the point from his sting wound as much as possible. Kino, however, “hovered; he was helpless, he was in the way” (Steinbeck, p. 3). Later, Juana makes a poultice of seaweed to relieve Coyotito and stop the poison from spreading to other parts of his body. At moments like these, Kino is left wondering about the personality of Juana who can quickly switch roles between an obedient and docile wife and a decisive resolute person.

*Kino had wondered often at the iron in his patient, fragile wife.  
She, who was obedient and respectful and cheerful and patient,*

*she could arch her back in child pain with hardly a cry. She could stand fatigue and hunger almost better than Kino himself. In the canoe, she was like a strong man. And now she did a most surprising thing. (Steinbeck, p.10)*

Juana takes a more daring decision as she resolutely urges her husband to either fetch the European doctor to treat Coyotito or if he would not come, take the child to him. By insisting that her son must receive the proper treatment she challenges and subverts two hegemonic social barriers of colonial oppression and female subjugation. Poor fishermen of La Paz have been exploited for more than a century by white European settlers who did not consider them humans. In Juana's community, there was no precedence of anyone being treated by the doctor who entertained only rich people. Equally, Juana rebels against the gender norms of her society where women are expected to follow men's decisions. Juana's desire to get treatment from the doctor is viewed as insane both by Kino and the inhabitant of the surrounding brush houses who has gathered in their house. However, Juana stays firm over her decision to take the child to the doctor. *"'He would not come,' the people in the yard said. 'He would not come,' the people in the door said, and the thought got into Kino. 'The doctor would not come,' Kino said to Juana (p. 4).*

Despite the opposition of her husband and the whole community, Juana stays steadfast over her decision and says: "Then we will go to him" (Steinbeck, p.11). In this moment of her child's sickness, Juana walks side by side with Kino to go to the doctor's, followed by her in-laws and the fishermen. In times of peace and tranquility, Juana seems to be a different person who obeys all the social norms of a strictly regimented patriarchal society and follows Kino's commands. However, it is in times of crisis that Kino is helpless, even impotent, and Juana assumes an authoritative position to guide Kino's actions.



There are several situations in *The Pearl* where the voice of sanity from Juana is silenced by Kino by asserting his dominance as a man. Power relation between husband and wife is thus significantly tilted in the favor of Kino who can impose his decision despite their irrational premises and potential danger for the future of the family. Twice, for example, Juana insisted strongly that they must dispose of the pearl as it has brought evil and danger to their family and will eventually lead to their ultimate demise. Kino, however, insists that the pearl is a window of opportunity for his family to escape oppression, degradation, and poverty. However, there are also situations, although few, where Juana plays the defiant role of a resolute woman and forces her husband into compliance with her decisions. When Kino accidentally kills a man and they are on the run, Kino realizes that the trackers are catching on to them quite fast. He proposes that he would distract the trackers while Juana and Coyotito should remain hidden in the bushes to escape from there when the trackers have gone after Kino. Juana, however, resolutely denies his proposal and decides to keep the family together.

*"No," she said. "We go with you." "I can go faster alone," he said harshly. "You will put the little one in more danger if you go with me." "No," said Juana. "You must. It is the wise thing and it is my wish," he said. "No," said Juana. He looked then for weakness in her face, for fear or irresolution, and there was none." (Steinbeck, pp.105-106)*

In moments like this in the novella, we see a shift of power between gender roles. Although Juana knows that they were in great danger, she decides to stay with her husband instead of parting ways with him. Kino's premonition about Coyotito being endangered is later confirmed when he is shot and killed by one of the trackers. However, when Juana decides resolutely that she wanted to take the risk, Kino could see no use in trying to force her to comply with his decision.

### Juana's Wisdom and Foresight

The initial impression of Juana's character in the story is that of a simple submissive housewife who minds her domestic chores and takes care of her son and husband dutifully. However, as the plot complicates and Juana's character is tested, the reader comes to realize her wisdom and foresight. Kino suffers to a great extent due to deliberately neglecting her timely advice and ignoring her voice of sanity and wisdom. Near the end of the novella, Kino finally turns around and starts heeding Juana's advice about the pearl being evil for the family. By then, it is already too late as their child's death has done irreparable damage to the family. As Wagner-Martin points out, she is the voice of "wisdom, common sense, and authority to balance the [Kino's] more wistful and sometimes unrealistic hopes" (1994, p. xvii).

She is the one who prays for the pearl to solve the misfortunes of her family. It is as if she snatches the pearl out of fortune's hand through the force and sincerity of her prayers. She was making the "*majic prayers...to force the luck, to tear the luck out of the gods' hands*" (p.21). More than any other morning in their lives, Juana's "*secret melody of the pear*" (p. 21) was very strong because there was the great urgency of her only child's weakening health and swollen shoulder. She was blending the song of the pearl with "the Song of the Undersea" to force gods to put a pearl into Kino's hands at the bottom of the sea.

Finding a pearl among the hundreds of thousands of seashells strewn on the seabed was not something dependent on hard labor or physical strength but more on luck and the will of gods: "But the pearls were accidents, and the finding of one was luck, a little pat on the back by God or the gods or both" (Steinbeck, p. 20). Juana's urgency as a mother seems to force fortune in her favor when Kino finds not just a pearl but "the pearl of the world". Juana is, however, quick to realize that her family's tranquil and secure life is shattered as soon as the pearl enters the house. She discerns the threat that the beauty and value of the pearl pose for the family's future. Juana

implores her husband twice in strong words to get rid of the family and save his family, but Kino wouldn't listen. *"This thing is evil... Throw it away, Kino. Let us break it between stones. Let us bury it and forget the place. Let us throw it back into the sea"* (p. 41). However, for Kino, the hopes of a better life in the future overshadowed any realistic apprehensions of Juana. Although Juana wanted the pearl badly and willed it into the hands of her husband to cure Coyotito, she is quick to realize that the family needs to stay away from the pearl. Kino, on the other hand, in his thick-witted shortsightedness takes too long to realize it. When Juana stealthily goes to the beach and tries to throw the pearl back into the sea, she is caught by Kino at the very last moment when she is about to swing her hand and release the pearl toward the sea. Kino snatches the pearl and beats her viciously. Kino's refusal to part ways with the pearl sets in motion a series of unfortunate events that eventually lead to the murder of their only child Coyotito.

Despite her husband's physical abuse, Juana does not complain nor does she hold any grudge against him. Her chastened calm and resignation seem to form a cocoon inside which she is both sure about her gendered role as a female and, at the same time, is puzzled by it. She would understand what it meant when Kino would say, *"I am a man"*:

*It meant that he was half insane and half god. It meant that Kino would drive his strength against a mountain and plunge his strength against the sea. Juana, in her woman's soul, knew that the mountain would stand while the man broke himself; that the sea would surge while the man drowned in it. And yet it was this thing that made him a man, half insane and half god, and Juana had need of a man; she could not live without a man. Although she might be puzzled by these differences between man and woman, she knew them and accepted them and needed them. Of course, she would follow him, there was no question of that (Steinbeck, pp.60-61).*

Juana seems to live in an existential crisis in which she is both the subject and the object of her deliberation. As she ponders over the traditional gender-based differences between a man and a woman, she can consider them from a distance in spite and see their unjust nature. Although she is very well familiar with these differences and accepts them in her daily life, she is not desensitized to their existence but chooses to accept them. By the end of the story, Juana comes out as a fully transformed character who has been through tragic events and as a result, gained a new stature and wisdom. After passing through testing trials and troubling times, Juana emerges as a changed person who is initiated into a new being, a personal transformation that empowers her. This transformation not only underscores her personal growth but also its effect upon her relationship with Kino who grows to be more accommodative and respectful of Juana as a human being – as an individual who deserves to be acknowledged (Barker, 1995, p.115).

At the end of the novella when Kino and Juana come back to their village and walk to the seaside side by side, Juana hands over the pearl to Kino to throw it into the sea. She knows that Kino still wanted the pearl and also detested it for what it had done to the family. By giving him a chance to dispense with it himself Juana seems to help him get the pearl's love out of his heart and also to restore his lost dignity in the eyes of his fellow fishermen: "And Kino drew back his arm and flung the pearl with all his might. Kino and Juana watched it go, winking and glimmering under the setting sun. They saw the little splash in the distance, and they stood side by side watching the place for a long time" (Steinbeck, p.89).

## CONCLUSION

For Juana and her family, "the pearl of the world" brought more misery than joy. Because they possess the pearl, the family undergoes an odyssey of misfortunes that climactically end in the murder of their innocent child. At the end of the narrative, both

parents come back to their village of the brush houses carrying the dead body of their only child. Walking side by side, Juana and Kino seem no longer living in a hierarchical gendered society in which males and females have very distinct places and obligations. Rather, they seem like two gendered incarnations of the same life force that runs through every living being: "The two came from the rutted country road into the city, and they were not walking in single file, Kino ahead and Juana behind, as usual, but side by side" (Steinbeck, p.87-88). Juana, more than Kino, seems to have grown and transformed as a result of the travails of her journey through time and space. She is reincarnated into a human who has her proper station in the scheme of things. Barker (1995) says: "With the first tableau Steinbeck draws of Juana and Kino's relationship, Juana appears as a submissive figure trailing after her husband with devotion nearly dog-like. Indeed, the narrator's choice of verbs suggests a subordinate status that is less than human" (p. 115).

After passing through suffering and pain, both Kino and Juana seem to have transformed into a relationship in which the gender boundaries are blurred, if not obliterated. Juana on her part has come out on the other side of suffering as a mature woman who has grown through pain and gained calm and wisdom. Kino also seems to have outgrown his impulsive gendered extrovert self. He has transcended his unquestioned assumption of conventional patriarchal norms and colonial mindset. He has come to terms with the fact that Juana is his better part whose resolution, wisdom, and foresight he needs as much as he needs his own physical strength and courage. Juana's character redeems her humanity by the end of the story when Kino feels no shame in walking side by side with his wife. His acceptance of Juana as an equal symbolizes Kino's assimilation of the female aspects of his "self" through which he gains the courage to part ways with the pearl and threw it back into the sea.

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