

White Americans' Dehumanization Toward American Indians in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*

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Abstract. The article explores the representation of the issue of white American's dehumanization towards American Indians in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. The article describes the fact that Steinbeck addresses dehumanize approaches which white Americans did towards some aspects of American Indians lives including the lifestyle, belief, and culture. In the analysis, we use the sociological approach by applying the concept of dehumanization by Frantz Fanon. The research shows that Steinbeck concerns mainly about three dehumanize acts by white Americans against American Indians. First, white Americans conditioned the American Indians to obey the rules and adjust their lives. Second, American Indians had to embrace white American's religion. Third, white Americans forced American Indians to pursue their culture especially the language and art. Generally, this study shows that Steinbeck disagrees with discrimination and oppression by White Americans towards American Indians.

Keywords: *Dehumanization, Ethnic deterioration, American Indian, Colonialism.*

1 Introduction

Dehumanization is the psychological process of demonizing the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment. This can lead to increased violence, human rights violations, war crimes, and genocide. This is illustrated in the novel *The Pearl*. *The Pearl* is one of the famous literary work written by John Steinbeck in 1945, and *The Pearl* appeared for the first time in Women's Home Companion Magazine in December 1945 as The Pearl of World. This novel had been adapted into a film. As a famous American author, Steinbeck had got The Nobel Prize in literature in 1962. *The Pearl* particularly depicts the attitude of White Americans toward American Indians in detail. It is known that White Americans treat American Indians as they like even inhuman. Steinbeck wants to show that the Whites did vicious matter toward American Indians. They oppress, rob and look down toward the Indians. The Whites do what they want to American Indians without considering them as humans. They do not care about their right either. They keep on terrorizing American Indians for their profit. The White Americans influence the Indians in many aspects. Indians had been the victim of the White Americans since the Whites came to America for the reason of the land, resources, or even laborers.

Consequently, the Indians lost their land gradually destroyed and the White Americans confined them begot for the part of the reservation. To make it worst, the White Americans caught and forced them to work as laborers or even as slaves as Steinfeld said that one of the

objects of those who stand forth to the world as a symbol of liberty was to take Indian slaves [9]. Some White Americans even named the Indian as “Native Land Labrador” that is meant “the place with an abundance of labor material.”

The Pearl has been analyzed by some researchers. For example, Ullah, et al. analyze this novel in the Marxist approach. They say that *The Pearl* presents a picture of the struggle between the upper and lower classes. It portrays how the upper class, dominated by capitalists, controls and exploits the lower classes by utilizing the social system of capitalism [10].

The White Americans did not let Indians have their property. They would take it even though they had to kill them. Dinnerstein states that friends, relatives, and neighbors of White Americans injured or killed during the fighting [1]. Moreover, some tribes still occupy lands coveted by the White Americans because of their timber, coal, oil, or other resources. To seize Indians’ resources, the Whites never care about the condition of Indians. They only think about what can they get by exploiting Indians’ land — the American Indians in the first notion that settled in America and built a great civilization. They had lived there for thousands of years before the Whites came and took their land. The coming of the Whites who needed land for their settlement has made the Indians lost a million acres of their land. They are no longer the commander of their land. The ways of their lives have become a subject to the will of dominant power, the Whites.

The Whites and the Indians began to be associated since the coming of the Whites into Indians territory. Since then, Indians and the Whites later named White American had a kind of relationship which influences each other in the form of attitudes, habits, and other social terms. As the native Indians welcome the newcomers with few exceptions, and the newcomers had repaid with despoilment and abduction. About the White Americans, the Indians had little capacity for compromising, for yielding to avoid the White’s command in order to salvage what he could have. The condition which had been already changed makes the Indians enter their land without their property because the White settlers flooded the country. The attitude of the Whites in such condition was not fair since they could easily stay in Indians’ territory and Whites commonly robbed the belonging of Indians property and also to drive out the Indians. White people’s maltreatment to them is caused by their condition of being poor and uneducated. In addition to this, no one among them can read and write. So that, the Whites think that they can do what they want to Indians and take advantage of this situation.

2 Methods

This research uses a sociological approach to observe the data. The function of this approach is to explain the society’s conditions contained in literary work as a reflection of society in real life at the particular time. The author who is also the member of society cannot avoid the influences from his surroundings that also has established his personality. In the sociological approach, the existence of literary work is as the mirror of the history.

Dehumanization is not a new concept, and it has been mentioned quite frequently in academic literature or modern media. It is important to clarify what is meant by dehumanization, as the term encompasses many concepts. A recent publication suggested the following definition of dehumanization is a process that allows actors to overcome social sanctions and psychological aspects of resistance in order to commit certain actions and to feel certain (more positive) ways about the sanctions”. In addition, Frantz Fanon states that dehumanization is the veritable creation of new men but this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural

power, the thing which has been colonized becomes a man during the same process by which it frees itself [2].

Fanon gives an understanding of a desire in developing a new humanism where he sees the existence of racist differences in Algeria [3]. His analysis is also used to analyze and understand other marginalized countries, demeaning every human being, and oppressing individuals and groups based on religion, ethnicity, skin color and race. He also argues that it is essential to realize and strive to defend righteousness and justice not necessarily despised by White people. He also explains that dehumanization is an inhumane act but merely as an object or indifferent to human values as well as degrading the oppressed.

Dehumanization is also the psychological process of demonizing the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment. It can lead to increased violence, human rights violations, war crimes, and genocide. According to Luna, dehumanization is “a complex, relational and subjective phenomenon. Studies on it primarily focus on how it enables abuse in the midst of conflict, or how it shapes perceptions of others” [5]. She also mentions in another article that “Dehumanization is a ubiquitous facilitator of aggression and group differentiation that undermines peaceful group relations” [6]. In this concept, the opponents view each other as less than human and thus not deserving of moral consideration. The more severe the conflict, the more the psychological distance between groups will widen. Eventually, this can result in moral exclusion. Those excluded are typically viewed as inferior, evil, or criminal.

It is theorized to take on two forms: animalistic dehumanization, which is employed on a largely intergroup basis, and mechanistic dehumanization, which is employed on a mostly interpersonal basis. However, this study more focuses on animalistic dehumanization. It can occur discursively (e.g., idiomatic language that likens certain human beings to non-human animals, verbal abuse, erasing one’s voice from discourse), symbolically (e.g., imagery), or physically (e.g., chattel slavery, physical abuse, refusing eye contact). Dehumanization often ignores the target’s individuality (i.e., the creative and interesting aspects of their personality) and can hinder one from feeling empathy or properly understanding a stigmatized group of people.

As the outside of the scope of morality and justice, individuals view that, “the concepts of deserving basic needs and fair treatment do not apply and can seem irrelevant.” [7]. Any harm that befalls such individuals seems warranted, and perhaps even morally justified. Those excluded from the scope of morality are typically perceived as psychologically distant, expendable, and deserving of treatment that would not be acceptable for those included in one’s moral community. The common criteria for exclusion include ideology, skin color, and cognitive capacity. We typically dehumanize those whom we perceive as a threat to our well-being or values [4].

3. Results and Discussions

The research shows that Steinbeck concerns about three dehumanization acts by White Americans against American Indians. First, White Americans conditioned the American Indians to obey the rules and adjust their lives. Second, American Indians had to embrace white American’s religion. Third, white Americans forced American Indians to pursue their culture especially the language. Generally, this study shows that Steinbeck disagrees with discrimination and oppression by White Americans towards American Indians.

The Pearl has many representations that can be associated with dehumanization. First, The Pearl represents the Whites who come to colonize the Indians. By the time Kino finds an enormous and beautiful pearl, but after that, he forgets his true identity. He tries to take the highest profit from the pearl, so he protects it furiously. Secondly, Steinbeck creates a character Kino as a representative of the Indians people who successfully influenced and destroyed by the Whites. Third, Coyotito, Kino's son, is a representation of the ancestral values held by the Indians. At the end of the story, Coyotito died. The death of Coyotito represents the disappearing culture of the Indians, replaced by the culture of the Whites.

In Steinbeck's novel, there are several acts of dehumanization committed by White Americans toward the life of Indian Americans in *The Pearl*. Steinbeck describes the changes experienced by the Indians after the occupation of the Whites against Indians' culture vividly. All the actions of the Whites make the life of the Indians changed and as a result; the authenticity of their ancestors was displaced by the new way of life brought by the Whites.

First, the act of dehumanization that Steinbeck conveys is through the actions of the doctor in *The Pearl*. The doctor, who is a white man, refuses to treat Kino's son, who is stung by a scorpion and dying. He thinks that the Indians are lower than his and not equal with the White race.

"Have I nothing better to do than cure insect bites for 'little Indians'? I am a doctor, not a veterinary."

"Yes, Patron," said the servant.

"Has he any money?" the doctor demanded. "No, they never have any money. I, I alone in the world am supposed to work for nothing—and I am tired of it. See if he has any money!" [8]

The above quote shows how the doctor's attitude toward the Indians. He demeaned the Indians and considered them as an inferior race, just like animals. This action represents the actions of the White people against the Indians. During the Whites' colonialism, the Indians were treated inappropriately even inhumane ways. They are regarded as animals that are not worthy of pity. The Indians no longer depend on their method of treatment taught by their ancestors. The attitudes make them compelling to follow what the Whites demand. Steinbeck describes these actions very clearly in his novel.

While it is not explicitly stated, the doctor attends Coyotito and gives her something that makes her illness more severe. So that, the doctor can return in one hour and pretend to cure Kino's daughter of the scorpion bite. Steinbeck shows that the seaweed poultice that Juana applied has taken care of the bite; therefore, the doctor's actions are acts of inhumanity. His act contradicts from the ethics of his profession. He tries slyly to compel Kino to give him the pearl for safekeeping, but the doctor is greedy to have the pearl by himself. To strengthen the avarice of the doctor, Steinbeck presents some beggars that talk about the doctor's character. They realize of "his ignorance, his cruelty, his avarice, his appetites, his sins, his clumsy abortions and the little brown pennies he gave sparingly for alms". The doctor represents all of the evil forces working against Kino in Steinbeck's novel.

Although the doctor does not figure vividly in the novel's plot, the doctor is a prominent character in *The Pearl* because he represents the colonial attitudes that oppress the Indians. The doctor symbolizes and embodies the colonists' arrogance, greed, and condescension toward the natives, whom the colonists do not even try to understand. Like the other colonists, the doctor has no interest to the Indians. He has come only to make money, and his greediness distorts his human values. As a physician, the doctor obliges to save human life. However, when he faces

the Indians, he always ignores them. The doctor feels no such duty. He is heartless to refuse to treat Coyotito for the scorpion sting because Kino lacks money to pay him. Thus this act demonstrates the human of political conquest rooted in the desire for financial profit. In this novel shows that the doctor is obsessed with European society and their cultural values grip his mind so deeply that he does not realize how ignorant he is toward Kino and the other Indians.

Second, dehumanization act contained in *The Pearl* can be seen from the actions of the priest. After he colonizes for so long, the Indians choose to follow the religion of the White people, namely Christian, and was forced to abandon their faith that they believed taught by the ancestors. This is a result of the White race are often degrading any matters relating to the Indians.

It came to the priest walking in his garden, and it put a thoughtful look in his eyes and a memory of certain repairs necessary to the church. He wondered what the pearl would be worth. Moreover, he wondered whether he had baptized Kino's baby or married him for the matter." [8]

Although the Indians already have the same beliefs as the White people have they are still being treated unequally and improperly. The priest does not want to do religious rituals for them, the Indians, such as marrying them or baptizing their children. They only do this if there is a profit from the Indians. The Whites must make the Indians believe in them, follow what they believe in, and finally be able to control the Indians as they wish.

Steinbeck creates the priest character to be a person who not concerned about the spiritual well of his parishioners while not presented as being as evil as the doctor. He has represented a rich person in *The Pearl*. He has a sermon that he preaches yearly and the central message of the sermon for instance that all people who are trying to improve themselves are sinning against God because they refuse to accept the station in life that God has assigned to them. Steinbeck also describes the priest as a greedy person but not blatantly. When the priest first hears of the great pearl, he does not even know who Kino is, he wonders if he married Kino and Juana, and then he immediately thinks of all the repairs which the church needs, and it can have if he can get Kino's pearl. His visits to the village are so rare that everyone in the village knows why he comes to visit Kino.

Due to the inhuman pressure and treatment from the Whites, the Indians finally neglect the cultural values that they profess from generation to generation's ancestors. The Indians are more concerned with how to survive under the pressures and survive from the environment that forces them to adapt themselves even in their land. The Indians begin to crave a luxurious life like what the Whites have, for example, their culture, education, and art. It is because Kino realizes that the Indians do not have adequate education like the White people. The Whites managed to indoctrinate the Indians that their culture is better than the Indians.

Third, dehumanization is also depicted from the actions of the doctor's servant. The servant does not want to be equated with the Indians by not respecting the Indians and refused to speak with the Indians' old language though he mastered the language.

(...) Kino spoke to him in the old language. "The little one—the first-born—has been poisoned by the scorpion," Kino said. "He requires the skill of the healer."

The gate closed a little, and the servant refused to speak in the old language. "A little moment," he said. "I go to inform myself," and he closed the gate and slit the bolt home.

[8]

This quote shows that the attitude of the Whites who do not want to be equated with the Indians so that they refuse to speak in the same language. This action implicitly gives a view of the White thought that they are better than the Indians. So to equate it, the Indians must be willing to abandon their original language in order to be able, and they can socialize and survive their lives under the oppression of the Whites.

Besides that, the White Americans commit oppression toward the Indians in art, especially for songs. The song is considered as part of The Indians' culture. They are trying to survive this habit in their life.

“His people had once been makers of songs so that everything they saw or thought or did or heard became a song. That was very long ago. The songs remained; Kino knew them, but they were new no songs were added” [8]

This quote describes that formerly Indian people have their song, which they used to express the feeling, thought or idea. It is also told that the songs of the Indians have never been added to the new one because the Whites demean the Indians' art. Consequently, the Indians cannot produce another new song because of the condition where the White Americans always oppresses the Indians inhumanly. The Whites never accept and underestimate the Indians' culture. The Whites believe themselves have high culture and civilize than the Indians. The Whites always look down and do not care at all. Since the White people give them a very hard pressure that they cannot think freely. In other words, the Indians cannot develop their culture because they have already thought that their culture is not much as worth as the Whites' culture.

4. Conclusion

In Steinbeck's novel, there are several acts of dehumanization committed by White Americans toward the life of Indian Americans in *The Pearl*. Steinbeck describes the alterations experienced by the Indians after the colonialism of the Whites against Indians' culture vividly. All the actions of the Whites make the life of the Indians changed and as a result; the authenticity of their ancestors was displaced by the new way of life brought by the Whites. Dehumanization act contained in *The Pearl* can be seen from the actions of the doctor and the priest. Steinbeck also depicts that White Americans do oppression as one of dehumanization act toward Indians in the art field. The song is considered as part of the culture. Although Indian people have a very thick ancestral cultural heritage, white people always underestimate Indians and do not have cultures as great as whites. Till the end, White American always dehumanize the Indians. This is a Whites' unkind treatment of the Indians. As humans being, the Whites and the Indians are equal. There is no difference in skin color, religion or race. In the eyes of God, they have the same rights.

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