



Money Anxiety and Character Traits in John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*

Dr. Raeshma Godsen

Assistant Professor in English, Muslim Arts College, Thiruvithancode, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, India.

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Abstract— The American writer John Steinbeck is known for his realistic and imaginative writings which projects the societal condition and individual's psyche in combination of humour and sympathy. The works of John Steinbeck reflects the life of common people, their struggles, sufferings and emotional disputes. Rather than projecting fantasy and bombastic life style the works of John Steinbeck reflects poverty, slums, inequality, violence, trials of survival and the American dream. This paper aims at exploring the anxiety prevailed in human beings before and after attaining wealth with reference to the character Kino from *The Pearl*. The character changes and instability of human nature are also further aimed to be explored in this paper.



Keywords— Psyche, Instability, Dispute, Wealth, Suffering

John Steinbeck's novella *The Pearl* published in 1947 efficiently carries out the theme of American dream and apart from stating the positive state and progress of life; John Steinbeck has projected out the anxiety and negative characteristic traits that can develop in human beings when there is an unexpected entry of money in one's life.

Money anxiety commonly known as financial anxiety is a common condition or experience faced by every individual in regard of money management. The fears and stress related to financial handling is also categorized under the term money anxiety. Conditions like low income, high cost of living, past experience of poverty and the trauma faced by low income can be categorized under money anxiety.

Emily Swaim's article "Money Anxiety is Common, but You Don't Have to Handle it Alone" states money anxiety as "When money and financial concerns cause ongoing stress in your life, you could eventually begin to experience some feelings of anxiety as a result. This anxiety can, in turn, have a negative impact on your quality of life." (Swaim).

The novella *The Pearl* runs through the plotline of a pearl diver named Kino who takes a turn in his life after

the attainment of an unexpected fortune which carries an impact on his life. The protagonist Kino faces money anxiety after the attainment of the unexpected fortune which affects his mental health, breakup from all relationships and suspicion on all around him.

The story of the novella *The Pearl* opens in Kino's house where Kino is shown as a respectable family man who lives with his wife Juana and his infant son Coyotito. Kino's attachment with his family is highly evident when he thinks of the traditional 'Song of Family'. He wanted to be the protector of the family and the beginning of the novel justifies his thoughts. The story takes a twist when the infant son of Kino, Coyotito was stuck by a poisonous scorpion. Through the shift from 'Song of Family' to 'Song of Evil' John Steinbeck foretell the evil that Kino's family is going to move with.

The medical attention to Coyotito was refused by the doctor inspite of their family's insufficient finance providence. This makes Kino to dive into the sea in search of the 'Song of Pearl Undersea'. As that of Kino's Kino receives pearl from the undersea which he thinks the most precious and expensive thing all over the world. With this belief Kino returns home and states Juana that he has

received 'The Pearl of the World'. The thought of attaining the most expensive thing in the world made Kino to look at the world around him suspicious. As a result of this suspicion he looked at his friends and relatives in the sight of enmity.

Kino's look of suspicion is with the reason of safeguarding the pearl he got from the sea. This restricts him to believe the words of pearl dealers and refuses the money offered by them i.e. thousand pesos and fifteen thousand pesos. Though the money offered by the first dealer seems not to be reasonable, the second dealers bid of money is highly a reasonable one. It is to be remembered that Kino had gone into sea dive only to get some money in order to fulfil the financial expense of the infant child's medical treatment when stung by a scorpion.

Kino experiences money anxiety where after experiencing lots of financial strains and oppressions in the name of 'poor' and now he tries to gain as much as possible wealth to lead his in a highly comfortable way and so the be called as a rich man.

The concept 'American Dream' originated in the United States of America with an idea that irrespective of the status of living in the society every human can achieve better status through determination and hard work. The American dream brought a positive hope in the minds of people that it is possible to attain a better place and survive in the society irrespective of the distinctions in terms of caste, creed or religion.

After getting the pearl Kino's reaction Kino's reaction to oppression he faced as a poor man, the life he led with poverty and starvation comes in his mind. The well-known American Dream with the dream of freedom, equal opportunity, upward growth and success comes into the mind the mind of Kino. He remembers his desires as an American and wanted to fulfil it and come out his oppressed life. The desires that Kino wants to fulfil were: (1) He wanted Kino and Juana to get married in church with traditional wedding customs (ii) He dreams of his son Coyotito dressed in a yachting cap and sailor suit from the United States (iii) Kino imagines of buying a new rifle, which can break all the troubles he faced in his life (iv) He thinks of his son Coyotito going to school and learning to read and write.

In the pearl he saw how they were dressed—Juana in a shawl stiff with newness and a new skirt, and from under the long skirt Kino could see that she wore shoes. It was in the pearl—the picture glowing there. He himself was dressed in new white clothes, and he carried a new hat—not of straw but of fine black felt—and he too wore shoes—not sandals but shoes that laced. But

Coyotito—he was the one—he wore a blue sailor suit from the United States and a little yachting cap such as Kino had seen once when a pleasure-boat put into the estuary. All of these things Kino saw in the lucent pearl, and he said: "We will have new clothes." (26)

Kino's dreams not only express his expectations but reflects the condition of United States and the trials and tribulations of the natives who try to come up in their life out of the poverty and starvation they face with. The words "My son will go to school," (27), remembers William Wordsworth's poem "My Heart Leaps Up" which states "The Child is father of the man/And I could wish my days to be" (Lines 7-8). Steinbeck has projected the dream of middle class and lower middle class Americans who wanted their children to pursue education and their intense belief on education.

Yufi Wang in his article "Exploring the Realization of the American Dream Taking the Pursuit of Happiness as Examples" states American Dream as:

The realization of the American dream is the pursuit of a better life. The premise of the realization of the American dream is that everyone has an opportunity. They are equally judged by people, when they are taking a job interview, when they are applying for the university. They are not subjected to their financial situation and family background. If an opportunity is not equal, how can people believe that the American dream is real? (35)

The entry of the thought of gaining the unexpected fortune and being the richest man in their town made him to have a strained relationship with everyone around, he even tries to harm his wife in sake of the possession of pearl. Though Kino's brother Juan comments the pearl as: "It is the pearl," said Juan Tomas. "There is a devil in this pearl. You should have sold it and passed on the devil. Perhaps you can still sell it and buy peace for yourself" (69), Kino ignores the advice proceeds with the possession of pearl and falls in danger. Kino often suspects that along with the neighbours even his wife and brother would take the pearl from him if he had left the pearl out of him. The excess anxiety and the stress laid upon him make him to loss his sleep and to forget the humanity he had in him. "Here is your pearl. I found it in the path. Can you hear me now? Here is your pearl. Can you understand? You have killed a man. We must go away. They will come for us, can you understand? We must be gone before the daylight comes." "I was attacked," Kino said uneasily. "I struck to save my life" (65). The anxiety on the money and the pearl goes to

the peak when Kino was ready to harm his wife and kill a man.

The excessive thought of gaining money even brought out negative character traits in Kino. The negative characters in human like selfishness, pride, aggression and greed is found to be in the front forth of Kino replacing love and humanity he had in his earlier life. Olaf Simonse responses about financial stress as:

Financial stress can be regarded as an adaptive response to financial scarcity, it is often accompanied by negative socio-emotional states: it relates positively to loneliness and social exclusion and negatively to self-worth. Financial stress may also go together with impeded cognitive functioning. It is negatively related to attention, self-control, self-monitoring, planning, and taking initiative. (14)

The desire on social attention and the lack of self-control made Kino to lose his temper. This made him to sacrifice a lot of things from his life. Due to the negative characteristic traits and the turn of American dream into greed made him to forget all the responsibilities and the relations he had in his life. This made him to lose the house he resided, he remained a mere observer when the house he resided was put into fire, rather than taking the responsibility to protect his family after this incident he tried to protect the pearl in his hand again which made him to witness the murder of his own infant child Coyotito. Though Kino realizes his mistake and gets an opportunity to live his life back he was completely filled with guilt and despair and this emotional damage would continue till the end of his life. John Steinbeck has even given a hidden message to the readers that it is essential to dream to have a better life but the dream should not be overlooked by selfishness and loss of identity.

[5] Wordsworth, William. "My Heart Leaps Up." *Poets.Org*, <https://poets.org/poem/my-heart-Leaps>

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