

## A Twentieth-Century Countrywoman in Steinbeck's 'The Chrysanthemums': A Socio-Cultural Study of Opression

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### ABSTRACT

'The Chrysanthemums' is a short story written by John Steinbeck and published in his collection of short stories, called *The Long Valley*, in which, the author focuses on the description of symbolic elements such as nature to narrate his stories. Steinbeck excessively uses symbolism in his stories, and 'The Chrysanthemums,' a selected story from the collection is falling into the same category. With the combination of realism and imagination, Steinbeck describes social issues and shares an image of society to his audience. 'The Chrysanthemums' refers to the male patriarchal society, and the protagonist of the story—a woman called Elisa—cannot show her abilities because of social limitations. This issue is clearly revealed in Elisa's relationship with her husband and her communication with a stranger who visits the farm. Through the story, the chrysanthemums play a great role and symbolize Elisa's sexuality or artistic sensibility that are revealed through her communicative manner with her husband and either other members of the society.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck died in 1968 and won the Nobel Prize in literature six years before his death. The American writer reached the peak of his fame by publishing the novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. *Of Mice and Men* and *East of Eden* are his other masterpieces. 'The Chrysanthemums' is a short story by him, which first published in 1937 before being included as part of his collection, *The Long Valley*. In all of the stories in this collection, Steinbeck focuses on the description of the natural elements to narrate his stories through the high use of symbols. As symbols are signifying different meanings, they have been a part of our lives. Symbolism is developed by the authors' imagination, and the emergence of it was due to the trivial published realistic works. Written in nineteenth-century, symbols were used in literary texts, and many authors such as John Steinbeck, Edgar Allan Poe and William Blake put it into practice. They treated a subject with intense emotions by using symbols. When the readers have indulged in symbolic elements of texts, the number of writers pushed readers to think further. The reader's curiosity caused to comprehend the ideas of stories differently. Through the perspective of the main character, Elisa, 'The Chrysanthemums' reflects the periodic severity females had to convey.

'The Chrysanthemums' shows Elisa's unhappiness, demonstrating that women did not already experience equality up to the previous century. Because of her husband's aloof behaviour, Elisa symbolizes all women who were living in the early years of twentieth-century. The story depicts the miseries of a rural woman, Elisa in two dimensions: human rights' concept in the past, and her limited social freedom.

### 2. ELISA SYMBOLIZES IGNORED WOMEN OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

For centuries gender equality was sunk into oblivion and women rights made a limitation in their lives. In 'The Chrysanthemums,' Elisa represents a female whose freedom has been taken away by her husband, Henry. Since women did not cut adrift as men, they spent most of their lives at home or in gardens. Even though, after centuries, in the constitution of many countries, men and women look to have equal rights, but in reality, it did not go into orbit. A sanitarian wrote, "the policies cause many inequalities in the national and international level. Within these inequalities, women are in a more unfavourable situation" and as a result of gender discrimination, women, who constitute half of the world's population "are treated as second-class citizens" (Demirgöz Bal,

15). According to this article, women have been ignored by society and life standard of females is slightly lower than males. Women had to stay at homes for cooking and taking care of children. Because of male domination, human rights have not been fully implemented; so, women were victims of the extremism in societies. Elisa and Henry symbolize the limited rights of women in society due to the social injustice at the 1930s. Elisa had a simple life by being put under house arrest and not strolling. The only joy of Elisa were her flowers and especially the chrysanthemums. It was a social perspective that women did not have the right to leave home up to the time their husband backs home and expects to be served.

In the story, Henry is a self-ordained and self-obsessed person who against Elisa is always in contact with people. While Elisa was banned to stray from her garden, Henry could contentedly wander around. Henry and Elisa are reflecting a typical family structure and gender role perception of that society in the past. Not only Elisa but women as the whole experienced a simple life. Elisa is symbolizing any woman who was living in the village; a pure and straightforward life, without luxury. Serving their husbands, the country women did not have any wishes because their oppressive husbands were compelling them to withdraw from their interests. Women took a submissive role in society; they were unable to present their ideas and gradually sent to the background of society. Elisa's life is very dull, and she always lived under the pressure of her husband. Besides, the lack of a child made Elisa turn her interest to the chrysanthemums that symbolize Elisa's children. She is feeding them carefully and paying attention to them obsessively.

In relationships, when couples cannot set aside time for themselves, it causes problems physically and either mentally. Mentally, Elisa feels lonely and isolated. There is a difference between feeling alone and being lonely, and even if Elisa and her husband live together, she was still feeling alone. In all marriages, there should be a private sphere for couples, but this personal territory should not cause them to forget each other. Elisa and Henry's duties keep them busy all day long, and it is a barrier for them to spend free time together. Elisa and Henry are working every day, and it causes Elisa's disruptive excessive loneliness. Investigating the general belief about a woman's position in the society, Elisa suffers a regression from the masculine role, and her frustration with the male-dominated society causes her to make dreams for liberation—from her defined the passive case. That is why weirdly she asks Henry "Do any women ever go to the fights?" (Steinbeck, 155). As Charles A. Sweet mentioned, Elisa became "the representative of the feminine ideal of equality

and its inevitable defeat" (Sweet, 213). Indeed, Maiti wrote, "A knowledge of the women and their relationships to the men in Steinbeck's fiction helps to elucidate the characters of the men themselves [...] Women in Steinbeck's fiction, because of their closeness to Nature and to the Creator Himself, instinctively understand both human nature and life, which make the need to comprehend their implications and complexities unnecessary" (Maiti, 3). Formerly, Simone de Beauvoir described that women traditionally had to accept a defined role as a wife in the society, "women have been traditionally prevented from working outside the home" and obliged to "attach themselves to a male breadwinner to ensure their survival and that of their children" which finally encourages "inauthenticity". Beauvoir argues that "the way forward for women is to pursue economic independence through independent work and through a socialist organization of society, which would favour women's emancipation and autonomy." (Tidd , 52-53)

### 3. THE CHRYSANTHEMUMS SYMBOLIZE HOPE

The chrysanthemums in the story symbolize the children and Elisa is very careful about them. Although "she could not have known much about chrysanthemums," but she looks after the chrysanthemums and gives pieces of advice about them, "You can raise them from seed, but it's much easier to root the little sprouts you see there" (Steinbeck, 151). Actually, if Elisa could give birth to her children, she might not be interested in the flowers. Maternal instinct was pushing Elisa, and Elisa would hope to show the same interest to children as she shows to the flowers. The importance of childbearing for women was priceless as children mirror their mothers who are providing vital requisites of their children. It is an undertone for women as they find their children a piece of themselves, and devote themselves to their children to be grown up and look like them. For women, their child is an object of joy, and if Elisa owns a child, she would instead get out and forget about the troubles, even though for a short period. Women devote a particular part of their lives to their children. In 'The Chrysanthemums,' flowers are the only objects that Elisa is interested in, except for the house chores. Elisa looks into her garden just to see her chrysanthemums are grown up. It has been a part of Elisa's life, and Elisa's symbolized children are pulling her out of her misery. A lonely person is always in need of finding a struggle in life and the protagonist, Elisa, is in a challenge with the chrysanthemums. She loves her chrysanthemums because they give her vital hope to live. Her love

and affection on chrysanthemums is understood through this quote; “I had ten-inch blooms this year” (*Ibid.*, 151). Having something to show effort, makes her leave loneliness behind.

Life is not easy for the majority of people, and human beings struggle with various problems in their lives throughout history. There are many factors affecting the quality of daily life. Loneliness is one of the most significant problems and feeling lonely might affect a long period of someone’s life. There are many results of loneliness on humans, and its severity depends on the later. Some people are ready to be surrendered, and loneliness helps them to understand who they really are because no one is criticising them. Sometimes a lack of partnership which smoothly drives someone into loneliness. For countrymen, there are not enough choices to entertain, and Elisa and Henry do not have anyone to rely on them. Elisa seems to be left by her thoughts. Taking care of chrysanthemums attentively, she shows her loneliness to the reader. She is portrayed as a forlorn young lady at the age of 35—because of her husband’s aloof behaviours towards her. Living in the village, brought about some troubles such as having fewer people to get socialized with. That might be the cause of Elisa’s love and affection towards the chrysanthemums because having no one to interact with can slip someone’s interests to other types of interaction. In ‘The Chrysanthemums,’ no friend of Elisa explicitly mentioned. Elisa’s chrysanthemums always keep Elisa to spend her whole day in the garden and being married keeps her at home. But when Elisa met the tinker, she looks decisive to leave her old boring life behind and do a decent job which helps her to meet many people who might be the cure for her loneliness.

#### **4. THE STRANGER AND THE SETTING OF THE STORY SYMBOLIZE SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

The idea of gender equality was so radical that almost no one embraced it. As a whole, society never cared if women lived in a slightly worse condition than men. The society only expected men to be dominant. Thus, female rights were violated, and their freedoms were restricted. The tinker is a notable character in the story who travels to many cities with his truck. After talking to him, Elisa changed her mind by repeatedly questioning her position in society. When tinker asserts that a woman cannot grow the chrysanthemums, Elisa responds strangely by telling that “You remember so you can tell the lady” (*Ibid.*, 151). Elisa found freedom in her daily tasks. Elisa is very proud of herself in growing the plants, and it

was a success for Elisa to have ten-inches chrysanthemums. The tinker symbolizes freedom for Elisa and when he states “I go from Seattle to San Diego and back every year,” (*Ibid.*, 150) Elisa’s answer symbolizes her desire for a free life; “That sounds like a nice kind of a way to live” (*Ibid.*). Elisa had no interaction with town folks apart from the guys her husband was talking with and the tinker. The tinker evoked Elisa’s rebellious side and made her think about leaving the town and travel. The quote, “It must be very nice. I wish women could do such things” (*Ibid.*, 152) shows why Elisa never interacted with town people because she never felt that she belongs to there. Elisa decided to travel like the tinker to meet other people. She is a woman who aims to forget her loneliness and loves to struggle for what she dreams of doing. After Elisa met the tinker, her interests are changed because she realized that there are different works to be done that it shape her interests. Sharma describes Elisa’s newfound self-identity and its battle with social discriminatory,

The appreciation of her husband for her beauty and her chastity makes her realise that he, in fact, likes her feminine countenance. However, Elisa confronts major shock when she sees that the stranger has thrown the chrysanthemum sprouts onto the road and only the pot was taken. She has a setback which makes her realise that she was in vain looking for the recluse of manpower, as she could also be happy and contented in the life of a woman and a family. Finally, Elisa cries weakly at the end, making her look “like an old woman” and accept the fact that she has to live as a woman and has to be contented in the male-dominated world. (Sharma, 299)

Omrany and Pishkar refer to Steinbeck’s application of “the archetypal feminine” (Omrany, 115) According to William Osborne, ‘The Chrysanthemums’ symbolize loads of factual; “the perfect symbol for Elisa is the ambiguous chrysanthemum, that hardy, durable, oddly unfeminine flower, unfeminine because of its strength and massiveness and somewhat bitter smell and yet oddly feminine too because it is a flower. From its strong, tough stem comes a fragile, tender bud and bloom and flower. The symbolism here, as in many Steinbeck stories, is almost too obvious. When the tinker rejected the flowers, he was rejecting Elisa. The death of the flowers preceded the death of Elisa’s illusions.” (Osborne, 14)

Osborne reminded that there is “no love interest between Elisa and the unkempt tinker, except an

oddly platonic one, engendered by his apparent accord with her mystical musings. The important element in their relationship is her blind belief that he somehow understands her feelings about nature and beauty and spirit, feelings which no one else apparently has shared with her." (*Ibid.*, 13) Elisa is passing her life at home and garden. Henry, her husband, takes her to sightsee by his will. Henry always keeps control of Elisa, and the only entertainment is keeping guard the flowers in her garden. In this sense, Elisa is dependent on her husband, and it is evident that Elisa's freedom was taken from her. The only friend of Elisa is her husband. Henry is a person who seems not very interested in Elisa and does not pay much attention to her. Elisa is a person with ropes that Henry controls. She spent her life in a village without any social activity, she was interested in the flowers she raised in her garden. Henry restricted Elisa and Elisa accepted this criterion and buckled under. Consequently, she does not communicate with anyone in the village. Henry is responsible for the outside works such as selling and buying and making a deal with other men as indicated: "Elisa Allen, working in her flower garden, looked down across the yard and saw Henry, her husband, talking to two men in business suits" (Steinbeck, 148). Of course, while Henry is working, Elisa has nothing to do, and that is a cause that makes Elisa feel lonely. The relationship between Elisa and Henry is a bit weird; when Henry is busy to manage trades, Elisa is alone in the garden. Elisa turned her loneliness into a struggle of protecting her flowers. Besides, every evening when they go out to have fun, Elisa asks questions which shows that they are not going out often; if not, she would not have that amount of questions to ask.

The picture presented by this woman is favourable for her husband. Henry likes Eliza and in various ways tries to make her happier. He praises and adores Elisa's wearing style and reacts to her beauty when they go to the city centre for dinner. But, as soon as a new person arrives, everything goes wrong. The vendor draws the attention to Elisa's the chrysanthemums, something Henry has ever failed to notice. When he comments on the chrysanthemums, he disgusted Elisa somehow. Henry asserted that instead of flowering, Elisa could grow apples in the garden. In against, the stranger describes the beauties of the flowers which strengthen the emotional bond between Elisa and flowers. Elisa's emotions and aspirations are not defined in her gender identity. Because women's gender identity is not shaped on the basis of their nature, culture and social norms define feminine values, criteria and female roles. Steinbeck leaves Elisa to be judged by the reader when she is chatting with the vendor about her

oppressed aspirations, and the stranger who is representing the ethnic community punishes Elisa by throwing her flowers away. Steinbeck uses the flowers as symbols to describe the desperate state of women in the patriarchal society where—just as Elizabeth's Garden—has limited the world of women. Female attributes that are summarized in 'The Chrysanthemums' are ignored and rejected by the society, and the image Steinbeck represents from his female protagonist is consistent with the patriarchal society, while at the end, she is punished—because of ignoring the standards of this society. William Osborne explains that like most romantics, "Elisa perceives through intuition a mystical relationship between Nature and Man, a perception which she has been unable to communicate to her husband, whose inclinations are thoroughly utilitarian", and continues, "Her matter-of-fact response about having 'planters' hands that knew how to do it' is in remarkable contrast to her emotion-charged explanation later to the tinker when the same subject comes up."

To dramatize her response to claims of two different ways of life, Steinbeck provides us with two symbols: the tinker and his covered wagon, a man and a way of life which appeal to her restlessness and desire for identity; and the tractor, the 'little Fordson' mentioned at the beginning of the story and linked with Henry Allen and a utilitarian life which was to Elisa unchallenging and unexciting. The literary pattern in which Elisa's ambivalence is most obviously dramatized is her unconscious blurring of her sexual identity—her behaving at one moment in a feminine and romantic manner, and then again in a ruggedly masculine and virile manner. (Osborne, 11)

All in all, loneliness has always been a problem both mentally and physically. In order to get over it, humans look for a new struggle or a partner in their lives. Being lonely makes people depressed. Solitude in the case that is not chosen can be damaging, and Elisa seems to be struggling from the loneliness which caused her to feel lonely even if she had a husband. That is why she takes care of her chrysanthemums because they are the only beings that keep Elisa's boredom away. Elisa's loneliness is profound and not apparent to understand and be observed. That is why to put ourselves in her shoes; one must empathize it clearly. Presenting the picture of women in the community, Steinbeck's works are categorized on feminist works that only convey the image of women in the community and refrain from

adopting any position towards the patriarchal community. Steinbeck reflects the rules of the domineering community easier, and ultimately, society also rejects her. The story is designed simply, and the author makes a significant contribution to the story through the simplicity of the events. The plot of this story focuses more on the study of Elisa. In other words, the story can be regarded as a narrative story more than the story of the incident. A woman's identity is ignored in the male-dominated society, and the events that occur in the story provide her with an opportunity to express her suppressed identity. The presence of the vendor in the middle of the story makes the identity of Eliza—as a woman—more attractive. As a result, a kind of hope and passion for life flames in Elisa. During this brief visit, Elisa goes out of the male fence where she is locked up, and her attention is drawn to a world of freedom that the vendor speaks of. Meanwhile, his feminine aspects are gradually depicted. When she returns back to her home, after taking a shower, she pores her body at the mirror for a while. But discarding the chrysanthemums by the vendor returns her to the fence of the beginning of the story. The story has a sad ending because all the hopes and enthusiasm of Elisa become desperate. Steinbeck, as a male author boldly expresses the bitter truth of women's lives in the patriarchal society.

Elisa wears garlanded clothing and has thick gloves and has a virile hat, and his face is enclosed in her dress. Around the garden where Elisa works is fenced and Henry is lying on the fence while he is talking to him. The author elaborately captures the limitations and loneliness that Elisa is within, and Henry discusses with Elisa from outside the fence. Elisa, a beautiful woman, is surrounded by horticultural clothing. Her clothing is not related to her sex; "She was thirty-five. Her face was lean and strong, and her eyes were as clear as water. Her figure looked blocked and heavy in her gardening costume, a man's black hat pulled low down over her eyes, clod-hopper shoes" (Steinbeck, 148). Elisa also observes her husband and two men who stand beside the tractor who is busy with the deal. An omniscient third-person narrator of the story observes the incidents from the outside world of the character is a narrator with male characteristics. The sense of loneliness and limitation on the soul of Elisa is more substantial, and finally, she is aimed to break the barriers.

The narrator of the story takes a look at the Salinas Valley, and starts the story by describing the aspects of the valley; "The high grey-flannel fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world. On every side, it sat like a lid on the mountains and made of the great valley a closed pot. On the broad, level land floor the gang

ploughed bit deep and left the black earth shining like metal where the shares had cut." (*Ibid.*, 148) From the very beginning, the place where the story occurs describes a limitation. Brewer wrote, "the story standing as an example of something that is true and important—the different ways men and women might respond to nature—that the author was not aware of revealing." (Brewer, 1) The Salinas Valley is where Steinbeck has grown, and this place has been featured in most of its works. As described at the entrance of *The Chrysanthemums*, foggy clouds symbolize the challenges of Elisa's life, while the Salinas valley symbolizes Elisa. Steinbeck describes the mountains when he wants to tell the stamina of the personality of his story; or, lonely hero inspires her story by describing the garden to the audience, and the flowers of the garden symbolize the children that she never owns. Paola Loreto wrote, "Steinbeck's diptych of the gardening housewives in *The Long Valley* seems to restage the coming of age of an American biocentric consciousness." (Loreto, 163) For Loreto, 'The Chrysanthemums' represents "the degeneration of the idea of westering" and says, "The antitype, or degenerate, type, in this tale, is not the married couple (settler and hunter), but the tinker who comes to the Allen's' farm from the road on an old, canvas-topped spring-wagon resembling a prairie schooner, and crosses Elisa's existence as an alluring, illusionary meteor of mythical westering." (*Ibid.*, 164)

Elisa stands out as the imperfect but able heir of the American westering legacy, because of her connection to the land through the tending of her life-affirming garden, and because of her fascination with the pioneers' spirit of freedom and adventure, which is what makes her vulnerable to the tinker's materialistic and manipulative behavior. The tinker emerges as the inevitable result of a wilderness that had been transformed into myth when it ended with the closing of the frontier and that had, in any case, been earlier damaged by the reversion of the pioneers' drive from spiritual to material concerns. Elisa, however, is the result of the realization of American literati that if the wilderness had to end (or had never existed), it could be replaced by a conscious cultivation of wildness: an interior craving for an unlimited and unknown space,

finally freed from greed. (*Ibid.*, 164-5)

## 6. CONCLUSION

As Henry Fielding, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck was a famous novelist who used realism in his works. Realism amounts to a full tread or drift in the focus of literature, which is an exceptionally elastic and elusive term. In literature, realism—in against idealism—portrays life with fidelity, or it is an attempt to show life as it is. In ‘The Chrysanthemums,’ Elisa symbolizes the inequality among genders. She reflects how women passivated through androcracy. Discussing gender inequality by trivializing women and making them worthless was forced by a mentality that gave women no right to lead their lives. As discussed in the story, men did not aim to entitle women in any deserved way by accepting women as a fertile source without considering their logical and authentic turn of mind. Men had tried to marry women instead of educating them. In ‘The Chrysanthemums,’ Elisa spends time at home and in her garden, and only at the time Henry asks her to go out, she concedes. Social structure made women play a passive role during history and resulted as men became the centrepiece of bourgeois society. Therewithal, the women constantly were suffering from claiming their rights; at the time, patriarchy rules seem to be unfair. Nowadays, human rights movements play a significant role in every comment that is related to someone different. In fact, the behaviour of men at the period affected their lives while made troubleshooting beclouded.

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