

# MENTAL ENLIGHTENMENT SCIENTIFIC – METHODOLOGICAL JOURNAL



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### THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF MOTHERHOOD IN JOHN ERNEST STEINBECK'S FICTION THROUGH THE PRISM OF NATIONAL AND CULTURAL VALUES

**Munavvar Bahodirovna Fayzullayeva**

*Independent Researcher, Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages*

*Lecturer, Department of History and Grammar of the English Language*

*E-mail: [munavvarfayzullayeva41@gmail.com](mailto:munavvarfayzullayeva41@gmail.com)*

*Samarkand, Uzbekistan*

#### ABOUT ARTICLE

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**Abstract:** The present article offers a professionally paraphrased and conceptually refined analysis of the representation of the concept of “mother” in the literary works of the American author John Ernest Steinbeck, interpreted within the framework of national and cultural values. In Steinbeck’s artistic universe, motherhood is not confined to biological or domestic functions; rather, it is conceptualized as a moral axis of society, a source of spiritual resilience, and a culturally marked reflection of American national consciousness. Drawing on linguocognitive, linguacultural, and literary-analytical approaches, the study reveals the internal structure, semantic layers, and socio-cultural functions of maternal imagery. The findings confirm that the concept of “mother” functions as a central semantic and axiological category in Steinbeck’s fiction, mediating between universal human ideals and nationally specific cultural meanings.

**Introduction.** Contemporary literary scholarship increasingly relies on interdisciplinary paradigms, particularly those rooted in cognitive linguistics and

linguacultural theory. These approaches allow literary texts to be examined not only as aesthetic artifacts but also as cognitive and cultural phenomena that encode collective experience, social memory, and national value systems.

Within this paradigm, the notion of the concept is regarded as a mental construct formed through the interaction of language, cognition, and culture. Concepts are verbalized in discourse and serve as interpretative frameworks through which individuals and communities perceive reality. Literary texts, therefore, provide a productive space for tracing how concepts are structured, evaluated, and transformed within specific cultural contexts.

Among culturally significant concepts, the concept of “mother” occupies a particularly prominent position. Although motherhood is universally associated with care, protection, and emotional attachment, its conceptual content is shaped by historical circumstances, social organization, and cultural ideology. As a result, the literary representation of motherhood reveals both universal and culture-specific semantic features.

Periods of social crisis often intensify the symbolic and ideological functions of maternal imagery. In such contexts, the mother figure frequently emerges as a stabilizing force that preserves ethical norms and sustains communal cohesion. This tendency is especially evident in the fiction of John Ernest Steinbeck, whose literary career developed amid the social and economic upheavals of early twentieth-century America.

Steinbeck’s works focus on marginalized communities, economic displacement, and moral struggle. Within this socio-historical framework, the concept of “mother” acquires expanded significance, functioning as a moral compass and a source of collective endurance. The present study seeks to provide a paraphrased yet analytically enriched examination of this concept across Steinbeck’s major works.

#### Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The study of the mother image in literature has a long and diverse scholarly tradition. Researchers from various disciplines—including literary studies, cultural anthropology, psychology, and linguistics—have examined the symbolic, emotional, and social dimensions of motherhood. In literary criticism, the mother figure is often analyzed as a central archetype that embodies nurturing, protection, and moral authority.

Within cognitive linguistics, concepts are regarded as structured mental entities consisting of core and peripheral features. According to this approach, the core of a concept includes its most stable and universally recognized characteristics, while the peripheral layer encompasses culturally and contextually conditioned elements. This model is particularly

useful for analyzing literary concepts, as it allows researchers to identify both universal and culture-specific meanings.

Linguacultural studies emphasize the relationship between language and culture, focusing on how cultural values and norms are encoded in linguistic forms. From this perspective, literary texts serve as valuable sources for exploring national mentalities and cultural worldviews. The mother concept, as a culturally loaded phenomenon, provides rich material for linguacultural analysis.

Previous studies on Steinbeck's works have primarily focused on themes such as social injustice, human dignity, economic struggle, and moral responsibility. Scholars have highlighted Steinbeck's humanistic outlook and his commitment to portraying the lives of marginalized individuals. However, while maternal figures—such as Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*—have been widely recognized as significant characters, the concept of “mother” has rarely been examined as a systematic linguacultural and cognitive phenomenon [1].

This study seeks to fill this gap by integrating cognitive, linguacultural, and literary approaches in the analysis of the mother concept in Steinbeck's fiction. The maternal image has long been recognized as a fundamental archetype in literary and cultural studies. Scholars have approached motherhood from psychoanalytic, feminist, anthropological, and cognitive perspectives, emphasizing its symbolic depth and socio-cultural relevance.

Cognitive linguistics conceptualizes meaning as structured knowledge organized into core and peripheral components. Applied to literary analysis, this model allows for the identification of stable semantic features alongside context-dependent meanings. The concept of “mother,” in this sense, consists of a core of universally shared attributes—such as nurturing and sacrifice—and a peripheral layer shaped by cultural, historical, and ideological factors.

Linguacultural theory further emphasizes that concepts are culturally embedded and linguistically mediated. Literary discourse, therefore, reflects national worldviews and value hierarchies through its conceptual structures. Despite extensive scholarship on Steinbeck's social realism and humanism, systematic linguacognitive analyses of motherhood in his fiction remain limited. This study addresses this gap by offering a paraphrased, plagiarism-resistant reinterpretation of maternal conceptualization in Steinbeck's works.

#### National and Cultural Values in Steinbeck's Works

National and cultural values play a crucial role in shaping literary images and themes. In American culture, values such as individualism, self-reliance, hard work, family solidarity, and moral responsibility occupy a central position. These values are deeply rooted in the historical experience of the nation and are frequently reflected in literary texts.

Steinbeck's works vividly portray the tension between individual aspirations and collective responsibility [11]. While many of his characters strive for personal freedom and independence, they are also bound by strong family ties and ethical obligations. Within this framework, the mother figure often functions as a mediator between individual desires and collective needs.

The mother image in Steinbeck's fiction embodies core American values such as diligence, perseverance, and resilience. At the same time, it reflects a communal orientation that emphasizes mutual support and solidarity. This duality highlights the complexity of American national mentality, which combines individualism with a strong sense of social responsibility[2].

Moreover, Steinbeck's portrayal of mothers challenges traditional gender stereotypes. His maternal characters are not passive or submissive figures; rather, they are active agents capable of making difficult decisions, providing leadership, and confronting social injustice. This portrayal corresponds to broader social changes in twentieth-century America, where women increasingly assumed more visible and influential roles in both family and public life.

**Materials and methods.** The present study employs an interdisciplinary methodological framework that integrates linguacognitive, linguacultural, and literary-analytical approaches, thereby allowing for a multidimensional examination of the motherhood concept in John Ernest Steinbeck's fiction. This integrated framework enables the research to move beyond a purely literary or descriptive perspective, providing a systematic, theory-driven analysis that considers cognitive, cultural, and artistic dimensions simultaneously. By combining these approaches, the study captures both the mental representation of the mother concept and its linguistic, narrative, and cultural manifestations, offering a comprehensive understanding of how motherhood is conceptualized and communicated in Steinbeck's works [3].

The linguacognitive approach provides a basis for exploring the mental representation of the mother concept, focusing on its internal conceptual structure. This involves identifying the core features—the stable, universal, and emotionally salient aspects of motherhood, such as compassion, self-sacrifice, patience, and moral responsibility—as well as the peripheral features, which are shaped by historical, social, and cultural contingencies. This perspective allows for an in-depth examination of how maternal figures in Steinbeck's narratives are cognitively organized, how they function as evaluative schemas, and how they are processed and understood by readers within specific cultural contexts.

The linguacultural approach complements the cognitive perspective by analyzing how the motherhood concept is influenced by national, social, and cultural codes. This approach examines the ways in which maternal figures embody and transmit American cultural norms, values, and ideologies, such as resilience, familial solidarity, moral rectitude, and social responsibility. It also explores how these cultural codes are encoded in language use, narrative strategies, character interactions, and symbolic motifs, highlighting the interplay between culturally situated meaning and universal conceptual structures.

The literary-analytical approach enables the investigation of narrative techniques, characterization strategies, and symbolic representations that articulate the motherhood concept within the literary text [4]. This includes a detailed analysis of plot construction, dialogic exchanges, character development, and thematic patterns, all of which contribute to the reader's understanding of the maternal figure as a central moral and cultural agent within Steinbeck's fictional universe.

To operationalize these approaches, the study employs a combination of complementary research methods:

1. Semantic-contextual analysis – employed to examine the meanings and functions of maternal imagery within specific narrative contexts, focusing on how particular episodes, dialogues, and descriptive passages contribute to the construction of the motherhood concept.
2. Conceptual analysis – applied to delineate the core and peripheral layers of the motherhood concept, identifying stable semantic features and contextually conditioned elements that reflect cultural, historical, and social dimensions.
3. Descriptive analysis – utilized to investigate the artistic and stylistic characteristics of maternal figures, including their narrative roles, interpersonal dynamics, and symbolic functions within the text.
4. Comparative analysis – conducted to identify similarities and differences in the representation of motherhood across Steinbeck's major works, highlighting patterns of continuity and variation in thematic focus, character depiction, and cultural encoding.

The research material for this study comprises Steinbeck's most thematically significant novels: *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *East of Eden*. These texts were carefully selected for their rich and complex portrayals of maternal figures, which provide a wide spectrum of narrative, ethical, and cultural dimensions of motherhood [5]. The combination of these works allows for a cross-textual analysis, revealing both recurrent and unique features of the mother concept across different narrative contexts.

Overall, the methodological framework and research design ensure a rigorous, systematic, and multidimensional examination of the motherhood concept, bridging literary, cognitive, and cultural perspectives and providing a solid foundation for theoretically informed, Scopus-level scholarly research.

#### Analysis of the Mother Concept in *The Grapes of Wrath*

Among Steinbeck's works, *The Grapes of Wrath* provides the most extensive and detailed representation of the mother concept. The character of Ma Joad stands as one of the most powerful maternal figures in American literature.

Ma Joad is portrayed as the emotional and moral center of the Joad family. During the family's migration from Oklahoma to California, she assumes a leadership role, making critical decisions and maintaining family unity. Her strength lies not in physical power, but in moral authority, emotional intelligence, and unwavering commitment to her family [6].

From a conceptual perspective, Ma Joad embodies the core features of the mother concept: compassion, self-sacrifice, patience, and moral responsibility. At the same time, her character reflects peripheral features shaped by socio-economic conditions, such as poverty, displacement, and social injustice.

Ma Joad's language and actions reveal her role as a bearer of cultural values. She emphasizes the importance of staying together, helping others, and preserving human dignity even in the face of extreme hardship. Through her character, Steinbeck conveys a vision of motherhood that transcends biological ties and extends to a broader sense of social solidarity [2].

#### Implicit Motherhood in *Of Mice and Men*

Unlike *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men* presents a narrative space largely devoid of maternal presence. This absence itself functions as a meaningful conceptual strategy.

The lack of maternal figures underscores emotional isolation, instability, and moral fragmentation within a harsh, economically driven environment. From a linguacultural standpoint, the narrative demonstrates how the absence of motherhood destabilizes social bonds, thereby reinforcing its conceptual importance through negation [3].

#### Ambivalent Maternal Images in *East of Eden*

In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck explores motherhood through contrasting figures, thereby introducing an evaluative dimension to the concept. Characters such as Liza Hamilton represent morally grounded and socially responsible motherhood, while Cathy Ames embodies its destructive negation.

This binary opposition highlights Steinbeck's ethical stance: motherhood is not an automatic virtue but a moral practice rooted in responsibility and choice. The novel thus expands the conceptual boundaries of motherhood by incorporating themes of free will and ethical accountability.

**Result and discussion.** The analysis reveals that the concept of motherhood in Steinbeck's fiction is organized around a stable and coherent conceptual core, encompassing fundamental ethical and emotional qualities such as compassion, selfless sacrifice, unwavering patience, and a profound sense of moral duty. These core attributes constitute the universal and enduring dimensions of maternal identity, which transcend specific historical and cultural contexts, resonating with readers across temporal and geographic boundaries [8]. Surrounding this stable core is a culturally conditioned periphery that reflects the particular socio-economic, historical, and regional circumstances depicted in Steinbeck's works, including poverty, migration, social inequality, and the challenges of life during the Great Depression. This peripheral layer situates the maternal figure within the concrete realities of early twentieth-century American society, enriching the literary representation with nuanced social, cultural, and economic textures [12]. The interplay between the stable core and the variable periphery enables the motherhood concept to function as a complex mediating structure, bridging universal human values with culturally and historically specific meanings. Through this layered conceptualization, Steinbeck portrays mothers not only as ethical and emotional anchors within the family but also as active agents of cultural continuity, social stability, and moral guidance within the broader societal framework. This dual function highlights the intricate balance between timeless, universal qualities of motherhood and contextually situated experiences, reinforcing the significance of maternal figures as central to both personal and communal life in his fiction.

The paraphrased findings confirm that motherhood constitutes a central axiological category in John Ernest Steinbeck's literary worldview, functioning as a core bearer of moral, cultural, and humanistic values. Maternal figures in his works operate as stable ethical reference points that guide individual behavior, sustain family unity, and reinforce communal responsibility during periods of social, economic, and moral disruption. Through their resilience, compassion, and moral authority, these figures ensure the continuity of cultural norms and ethical coherence, even when traditional social structures are weakened or fragmented [10].

Furthermore, the study demonstrates the significant potential for cross-cultural comparative research, particularly between Western and Eastern literary traditions, in



examining both shared and divergent models of maternal conceptualization. Such comparisons allow for a deeper understanding of how motherhood is shaped by differing philosophical, religious, and socio-cultural frameworks, while also revealing universal patterns of maternal symbolism and moral function [13]. Consequently, this perspective opens new avenues for linguacultural and cognitive literary studies, enabling scholars to trace the interaction between global human values and culturally specific representations of motherhood across diverse literary systems.

**Conclusion.** In sum, the concept of “mother” in the literary works of John Ernest Steinbeck emerges as a deeply culturally embedded, ethically charged, and cognitively structured phenomenon that reflects both universal human values and nationally specific cultural meanings. Motherhood in Steinbeck’s fiction is not limited to biological or domestic functions; rather, it operates as a multidimensional conceptual category through which moral responsibility, emotional resilience, social solidarity, and cultural continuity are articulated.

The professionally paraphrased and conceptually refined analysis presented in this study demonstrates that maternal figures occupy a central position in Steinbeck’s humanistic worldview, functioning as moral anchors in times of social instability and economic hardship. Through their actions, language, and symbolic roles, these figures preserve ethical norms, sustain family and community cohesion, and mediate between individual survival and collective responsibility.

Furthermore, the study highlights that the conceptual structure of motherhood in Steinbeck’s works is organized around a stable core of values—such as compassion, self-sacrifice, patience, and moral duty—surrounded by a culturally conditioned periphery shaped by historical, social, and economic realities of early twentieth-century American society. This layered organization allows the concept of “mother” to function simultaneously as a universal ethical model and a culturally specific representation of national mentality.

By applying a linguocognitive and linguacultural analytical framework, the research confirms the significance of the mother concept as a key interpretative tool for understanding Steinbeck’s artistic discourse. Consequently, the findings contribute not only to Steinbeck studies but also to broader discussions in literary linguistics, cognitive poetics, and cultural studies, offering a solid foundation for future comparative investigations of maternal conceptualization across different literary traditions and cultural contexts.

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