

WRATH IN THE GRAPES: BREAKING THE MYTH OF PROMISED LAND IN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

Avishek Chaudhury, Assistant Professor, Ananda Chandra Training College, Jalpaiguri, (W.B)

Abstract:

*A classic in every sense of the term John Steinbeck's **The Grapes of Wrath** is a testament to a historical and sociological phenomenon - the 'Dust Bowl' perhaps the greatest combined ecological and social catastrophe in American history. This Pulitzer Prize Winner novel depicts in realistic term how, thousands of people migrated to an alien land, in search of silver lining, were exploited and manipulated by the people in power. This paper attempts a critique on this exploitation of a large number of hapless migrants crippled not only by nature but also by crony capitalism.*

Key words: *Economic depression, Promised Land, Dust Bowl, Exploitation.*

The Grapes of Wrath - a tour de force in the American fictional world proves to be a monumental work in the historiography of the twentieth century American fiction writing, in which the theme of struggle for existence and social progression has been explored. The novel, published in March 1939, is actually a testament to a historical and sociological phenomenon - the 'Dust Bowl' - perhaps the greatest combined ecological and social catastrophe in American history. In a letter to his agent, Elizabeth Otis, Steinbeck himself wrote: 'I am trying to write history while it is happening and I don't want to be wrong.'¹

In his attempt to 'write history while it is happening' the author poignantly documents the conditions under which one group of American workers, the Oklahoma dust bowl refugees were forced to live in straitened circumstances during the 1930s. Amidst the greatest economic depression the United States has ever faced, these people had to abandon their homes and their livelihoods. They were ousted from their ancestral land which they farmed to live, not for profit, but merely to keep on living. Under the given circumstances they were drifted like lemmings towards the Promised Land because tractors were rapidly industrializing the southern cotton fields and erosion and drought were creating the dust bowl in wide areas of Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma.

A large number of people migrated to California as it was thought to be the land of milk and honey. It is to be noted that California was the homeland of Steinbeck. He was born in Salinas, California in 1902. So he had that first-hand experience of witnessing this tragedy in making. And it is generally agreed that the most significant biographical link between Steinbeck and his writing, is this fact of his birth and growth to maturity in the California valley.

The story of *The Grapes of Wrath* is not a complex one. The great storms ruined the crops and the Joads along with thousand others were then forced to give up their land. It was to be worked at a large scale by the bankers' syndicate. The huge tractors ploughed up the land for miles on and toppled over the poor shacks of the farmers as they shaved their foundations. Therefore, a large number of people were left with no other option but to migrate to California where the hand-bills promised employment for thousands in the orchards. In search of better means of living the Joads got themselves a rickety second-hand Hudson Six and turned it into a sort of covered wagon. And then they piled in - Grampa and Granma, Ma and Pa, six children, a son-in-law, Uncle John, and the preacher Casy. The journey was a long one as they had to brave more than 1000 miles through the mountainous range and desert. The situation became more troublesome as they did not dare to push their old jalopy more than a certain speed. It was a desperate race against time

because they wanted to get to the promised land before their money and supplies gave out.

However, when they reached the promised land to their utter surprise and dismay they found that they were unwelcome and despised. The garden of Eden, which seemed perfect from afar, proved to be a false Eden. They were called by the insulting name of 'Okies' and scarcely regarded as human beings. One health official, in a 1938 speech to the Junior Lions Club of Fresno, in California's Central Valley, described the migrants as 'incapable of being absorbed into our civilization.'² He added that : 'You cannot legislate these people out of California but you can make it difficult for them when they are here.'³

Therefore, to make it difficult for the migrants, California communities deputized hundreds of citizens. They organized the 'Associated Farmers' and prepared plans for a citizens' army of six hundred men to control striking workers. When workers organized a strike meeting in a public park in Madera on 21 October 1939, six hundred men wearing Associated Farmers' arm bands, attacked the gathering and injured many of the participants and by-standers including a congressional investigator. The landed proprietors of California manipulated the situation. They took advantage of their poverty and distress by hiring the migrants at starvation wages, treating them with great brutality and denying them even the basic human and civil rights. In the novel we see that the Joads are busy in picking peaches at five cents a box and thus by nightfall they have earned merely a dollar. Ma takes the credit slip to the camp store to buy groceries. But with the dollar spent she still doesn't have enough to feed the family.

Such were the contemporary problems upon which Steinbeck based this novel. Besides being sympathetic, Steinbeck was also realistic and he had meticulously reported all these events. He had explored contemporary social problems in earlier works -- like *In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men* etc. In the novel *In Dubious Battle*, he dealt with industrial disputes. It is the story of a strike in the apple Orchards of California, of communist organizers who moved in on a district where the wage has been cut below a living standard and that led the men in desperate fight for higher pay.

But *In Dubious Battle* is a hole-in-the-corner thing in comparison with the later work, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The idea of the novel undoubtedly grew out of a series of articles on California's migrant labour camps which Steinbeck had been commissioned to write for the *San Francisco News*. Steinbeck gained first-hand knowledge by living in migrant labour camps. He used to travel regularly through Route - 66, between Oklahoma and California to meet these people. These gave him the added advantage to portray reality as it was.

These experiences help in explaining the power which Steinbeck displays in *The Grapes of Wrath*, both in the epic scope of his narrative and the deep sympathy with which he treats the misery, suffering and degradation of the Joad family during their epic trek from the exhausted dust bowl to the fertile valleys of California. His bitterness and anger towards the exploitations of the migrants by the capitalist people came out equally strong for he makes it clear that the plight of the Joad family and of thousands of other families was, in his view, a man made evil and that, as a man made evil, it could be remedied by men alone. In chapter 25 of the novel Steinbeck portrays a heart-rending picture of that man-made evil. In Spring California becomes a paradise of fruit blossoms and tender vegetable plants. But during the said time when the harvest time approached, the big canneries, owned by the big landowners, depress prices and force wholesale crop dumping even though people were starving everywhere. Small farmers were ruined. And so it is that 'Men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system whereby their fruits may be eaten' (Steinbeck 349). People try to net potatoes thrown into the river, but guards hold them back. They come in cars to get the dumped oranges, but the fruit is sprayed with kerosene and burned. Pigs are slaughtered in ditches and buried in quicklime. But the grim irony is that instead of the excess production children die of malnutrition. Such grim picture reminds us of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The Grapes of Wrath is then a gem of minute description of history of exploitation. It faithfully orchestrates an accurate description of a critical period in the nation's history revealing the failure of the

American Dream as the Promised Land by portraying pictures of despair and suffering, social instability and individual corruption. The California portion of the novel even enacts an American version of European fascism, in which the deputies and vigilantes are proto-fascists and the migrants are hounded Jews.

Notes

1. This is quoted from *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (1989). The book is edited by Elaine Steinbeck & Robert Wallsten.
2. *Ibid.*
3. This is quoted from "'To Tom, Who Lived It': John Steinbeck and the Man from Weed path" written by Jackson J. Benson & John Steinbeck, published in *Journal of Modern Literature* (1976) Vol. 5. No 2

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