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Depiction of The Plight of Migrants in John Steinbeck's '*The Grapes of Wrath*'

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ABSTRACT

John Steinbeck, one of the most enduring American authors of the twentieth century spoke about the social evils which became common and deep rooted in the 1930s America. His works relate to the ordinary people such as migrants who struggle against social forces in order to survive. This paper attempts to highlight John Steinbeck's depiction of the plight of the migrants and their journey towards a better life in California in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Steinbeck takes historical events such as 'The Great Depression' and 'Dust Bowl' and writes about the common people who lived through these events. His research on California's migrant camps while working for San Francisco News helped him to write about laborers in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). His work combines expectation with desolation, hurt with opportunities, and agony with ethical development. He teaches people to be resilient and to never give up even in tough times.

KEY WORDS: migrants, struggle, California, dreams, humanity

JOHN STEINBECK

John Steinbeck, a distinguished screenplay writer, short story and non-fiction writer, journalist and playwright is one of the most enduring American authors of the twentieth century. He is noted for the works like *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *The Moon is Down* (1942) and *Tortilla Flat* (1935). His novels have naturalistic descriptions, symbolism and human realities. Steinbeck is a socially conscious writer who was not afraid to bring out the realities of the then American society as such. He gave voice to the downtrodden and made readers to understand the darker side of their life. Steinbeck took historical events such as the 'Great Depression' and 'Dust Bowl' and wrote about the common people who lived through these events. He brought attention to the elite society of US the plight of the migrant farmers and their evolution through their struggles.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The period of US prosperity and optimism of the 1920s was a time of new inventions, appliances, cars, bank credit and massive speculation on the stock market. On Oct 29th, 1929 all this came to an abrupt halt when the stock market collapsed. This tragic day marked the beginning of what is called the 'Great Depression'. The stock market had huge sums of people's money which was invested by a large number of banks. When the stock market collided the banks were also compelled to close down. Massive fear struck and the clients began to withdraw their savings. Those who could not reach their banks in time lost their savings and classified as bankrupt. Many business and industry had also lost their capital and were forced to fire their workers. Within six weeks of the stock market crash, twenty million Americans were officially out of work. Banks having speculated in stocks were forced to call in loans. This in turn forced farmers and home owners to leave their land and homes when mortgage payments could no longer be met. Consequently there was a mass unemployment that threatened the fabric of society. The novels published in this period were socially oriented and produced strong works that portrayed American

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culture and its primitive life as such. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is considered his magnum opus that tells the dream of a poor family. He glorified a simple, rural way of life.

DUST BOWL

Like the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl too affected the economic growth of the country. Places like Montana, Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas and Colorado were severely hit by horrid dust storms. This agricultural and natural disaster was known as the 'Dust Bowl' that was due to overgrazing and over-cultivation of the soil. The ensuing drought destroyed crops and top soil was blown away by heavy winds leaving families to starve to death. Many farmers headed towards the west, California. There were so many impoverished people who abandoned their farms. The derogatory terms such as 'Okie' and 'Arkie' were readily used to denote people from Oklahoma or Arkansas. Shanty towns or Hoovervilles sprang up all over the US. These were make-shift dwellings made of newspapers, driftwood or cardboard. The Dust bowl was a catastrophic event which resulted in a massive migration. Steinbeck used this Dust Bowl as the background of his novels, '*Of Mice and Men*' (1937) and '*The Grapes of Wrath*' (1939).

THE GRAPES OF WRATH (1939)

Steinbeck's novels are those kinds of fictions that emerge from his exposure in history and not from ideological modesty. He told the story of the 1930s migrants honestly and movingly in his *The Grapes of Wrath*. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is a novel that portrays unity, love and cooperation during the difficult times and celebrates humanity in all its aspects. It tells about the journey of Tom Joad and his family to California in search of better life and good fortune. They are compelled to leave their farm and set out for a journey like all other workers. The novel explores themes of poverty, discrimination, social justice, and sacrifice. His narration makes us sympathetic towards his subjects. The environment around these characters symbolizes the hardships and the blessings of life. Steinbeck gave the events as such that occurred at that period of time. His realistic writing brings a strong sense of empathy on his characters. As Fontenrose (1963) asserts, "*The Grapes of Wrath* is thus a product of his own experience and direct observation; its realism is genuine." (68) His realism is also seen in the fifth chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath*, "The Bank - or the company - needs - wants - insists - must have - as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling, which had ensnared them... while the banks were machines and masters all at the same time." (33) Steinbeck compares the bank to that of a monster. This is supporting the realism writing style by showing the thoughts of the poor as the banks and companies are sometimes unfair and evil. The novel provides the real struggle of the migrants during the time when it was published. Steinbeck collected records from Tom Collins who was the director of a camp in California and from photographs, interviews and his own writings on the migrants and their life. According to Robert in *Steinbeck's Typewriter: Essays on His Art* (1997), "Steinbeck worked day and night for nearly two weeks; sometimes dropping in the mud from exhaustion, to help relieve the people's misery, though of course no aid seemed adequate (Sheaves, 221-22)." (167) This one novel of Steinbeck stands as a testimony of human experience in difficult times.

Tom Joad makes his way home after being paroled from prison. He has served four years for killing a man in self-defense. It was a summer time and when a turtle tries to cross the Highway, a woman hits it with her car and a young man tries to run it over with his truck. The turtle for a fraction of second struggles to flop over the car with its legs in the sky but finally falls back on the road and continues its slow walk. The turtle symbolically represents the Joads' obstacles that hamper their journey that includes abandonment of the family members and mechanical loss. This acts as a foreshadowing for the Joads' experiences on their travel towards west. Burkhead (2002) states, "The encounter with the truck leaves the turtle on its back, but it recovers from the momentary set back and returns to the southwest trek. Reinforcing this symbolic association, the turtle is described as having yellow toenails, the same colour as Tom Joad's prison issue shoes". (78) Steinbeck through the turtle that struggles to cross the road presents a symbolic depiction of the farmer's plights towards their journey to the west. This represents that the universe is full of obstacles that fill life with hardship and danger. Steinbeck confirms that like the turtle that trudges across the road, the Joad family will be called upon, time and again, to fight the malicious

forces such as drought, industry, unemployment, starvation, human jealousy and fear that seek to overturn it.

The farmers begin their travel to California with a heavy heart leaving all their belongings and memories behind. Steinbeck voices the feeling of the migrants by exposing how much their homes are significant to them. They out of compulsion sell their valuable things, as they need money for their journey and also as they could not carry all those things with them. The farmers without any option obey their cruel brokers who pay fewer amounts as they very well know that the farmers are not in a position to demand high price. “*And when the sun rose, the camping place was vacant, only a little litter left by the people. And the camping place was ready for a new world in a new night. But along the Highway the cars of the migrant people crawled out like bugs, and the narrow concrete miles stretched ahead.*” (209) The tents came down and the families moved. Joads face hardships and setbacks on their way to California. Their family dog is hit by a car and killed and grandparents die. They get the help of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson while travelling to California. The Joads and the Wilsons get along very well and the Wilsons offer aid and comfort during grandpa’s death. The Joads offer mechanical assistance when the Wilson car breaks down. It is not a pleasant going for the Joads travelling in the desert. The Joads travel in the scorching sun, on top of their vehicle. “*The engine boiled very soon and Tom slowed down and took it easy. Up the long slope, winding and twisting through the dead country, burned white and gray, and no hint of life in it.*” (231) The Joads keep on trucking going over the mountains in New Mexico and Route 66 by crossing Arizona. Their road to California is not that comfortable for Joads’ as they expected. They face trouble caused by men as well as nature. Nature turns pitiless at their every turn.

The Joads’ family that was longer in the beginning of their journey to California gradually becomes smaller towards the end of the novel. The grandpa and grandma die of age and travelling. Three young men of the family abandon others in the middle of their journey. Tom, having killed a man for a revenge on Casy hides himself in fear of authorities. Connie leaves his pregnant wife to go in search of his career. Noah leaves the family and disappears in Oklahoma. Only the women emerge courageous and instill confidence in other men in the family. According to Zirakzadeh (2013), “By the novel’s closing, only the indefatigable altruism of Ma Joad and her daughter, Rose of Sharon, holds the family together.” (20) Steinbeck through his characters states that all the sources we get on this earth should be shared by all since we all are part of this huge community. It is seen that the migration from Oklahoma to California teach the Joads’ family to cooperate with the unknown strangers and being compassionate and flexible in the campus. In spite of the impolite handling they underwent, they help others and stay together. Steinbeck’s importance in *The Grapes of Wrath* is to stress the importance of being united in order to survive in challenging times. The suffering of the farmers, their aspirations for a better life and their unfulfilled promises are well summed up in *The Grapes of Wrath*. He endows the book with a dramatic appeal and a human touch. He elevates the whole mankind with his strong characters.

The importance of *The Grapes of Wrath* lies in its group rather than the individual. In the novel there is no one single protagonist but many who contribute to the success of the novel. Steinbeck depicts beautifully the food sharing concept of Ma Joad as group formation concept. Ma Joad shares her food with the children in the camp which highlights on coordination and unity. Sharing the food always had a deeper meaning in any society. When Ma Joad cooks in the government camp, the local children gather around her pot. She also leaves some leftovers for the starving children. The people of *The Grapes of Wrath* do not belong to some high class but are common working people who live in poor working conditions. The novel conveys its message that the strength of the man lies in the unity of the group and it is their duty to help others during distress. According to Johnson (1997) “... And she is the one who realizes important truths of the novel: that ‘we’ are one people and that the more a person suffers, the greater must be his effort to help others. (5) Steinbeck worries about the ways in which the new forms of wealth are simply destructive and corrupts the social and political life. They impose havoc and hardships on common citizens and affect the authentic individual lives and social relationships. The landowners are incapable to see, hear and understand the needs or wants of migrants or the most fundamental qualities of human beings. A natural act of the group is established in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Joads’ family joins Casy

in their travel to California and then they join with the Wilsons by sharing their stuff with them. Later they join with the Wainwrights and share their boxcar with them. The concept of family is differently portrayed in the novel. The family which is defined with its boundaries becomes an older one and the migrant lifestyle creates it with another meaning. Their life on the camp on the road gives them new links and new people to survive. According to Zirakzadeh (2013), “As Richard Astro notes, Ma likewise shifts her reference orientation from the family unit to the larger migrant community as a whole.” (139)

The Joads family exhibit equality and unity who have improved from their family interests to coordination with poor. The downward movements of the family are balanced by the upward movements by the end of the story. While the Joads family suffers from fortunes and moral values it also undergoes the loss of its members. But in the longer run, the family merges with the society, which brings family confidence, friends and hope to survive. Steinbeck’s messages are actually solutions and are universal. He says that those who are supple can change to new environment and they are the ones who survive and gain flexibility through the collective action. People who are self centered are isolated and those are integral in nature form their own constructive group. Steinbeck details the ways people rely on one another during the hardest of times, when they are pushed to the brink of survival by an economic system that imposes widespread misery for the comfort of a few. Steinbeck writes the plight of the migrant workers when they were abandoned by their own society. The *Grapes of Wrath* is a novel that offers a certain respectable dream for every soul and it gives confidence that it can be achieved through endurance of patience and hard work. Thus the novel proves to be strong which brings awareness to the other dispossessed people. It demonstrates frustrated desires and inexpressible suffering with an array of hope, integrity and unity.

Steinbeck depicts many characters and renders each family member as distinguishing characteristics. Their desires are simple and are portrayed as heroic and boldly drawn figures that embody universal suffering. Steinbeck displays the characters of an epic in the novel. Amidst their poverty they stand up exhibiting honesty, unity and moral behavior. Ma Joad becomes the centre of the novel who demonstrates strength, determination and love whatever circumstances it might be. She faces every hurdle boldly and keeps her family members intact in every challenging moment. At every point of time she builds confidence in other family members, encourages them to move forward and attends to the sick. Whatever little food she had, she ensured that it is shared by all the other members and did not leave anyone to starve. According to Burkhead (2002), “In this role it becomes necessary for Ma to evolve from the traditional female/ mother, one who follows the leadership of her man, to a leader itself.” (72) Steinbeck displays the honesty and integrity of migrants in every aspect of their life and maintains a balanced emotional state to their fellow beings too. Though they suffered innumerable losses like three men abandoning the family and Rose of Sharon’s giving birth to a dead baby, the family endures lot of perseverance and succeeds till the end. They manage to rise above all suffering exhibiting that they can hold moral values even in desperate situations.

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John Steinbeck taught people to be resilient and to never give up even in tough times through his novels. The novel ends with a flood that threatens human survival. The natural disaster only leads to group struggle and not to surrender. The rising water reinforces creativity, determination and generosity as human beings come to the aid of one another, even in desperate times. *The Grapes of Wrath* does not end with the negative side but ends with the promise for a better future. It ensures about the progress even after setbacks. John Steinbeck portrays the plight of migrants masterfully to retain dignity and to preserve the values of the family in times of adversities and other influences from men. The novel earned Steinbeck Nobel Prize and established his purpose in writing the novel that pretty well makes us feel sympathetic and understand the struggle of migrant life.

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