



DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP OF HUMAN BEING AND SOCIETY IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

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ABSTRACT

The Grapes of Wrath is a novel published in 1939 and written by John Steinbeck, who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1940 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. This novel throws light on every dimension of a human being. It deals with the inner life of Joad's family and outer too. Steinbeck does not confine this story to mere one family but this is an epitome of mankind passing through various phases of life.

The main aim of this paper is to show the fact that time, natural environment and conditions are individuals. They are always present at all times and at all places and they synchronize with the inner, the moral and spiritual conditions of humanity on earth. The novel has cosmic dimensions and universal significance. This American, social, moral and religious framework extends the thematic visions, which include the whole of mankind. The impression which dominates all scenes in the work is the voice of "we" against the voice of "I". Joad family symbolizes the movement of humanity from a static position to an ever growing social, moral and spiritual state of universal love. It is necessary to farewell narrow, egotistical and self-central individuality, if one wants to touch the universal dimensions.

Keywords: *Dialectical Relationship, Humanity, Suppression, Circumstances, Corruption*

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The title *The Grapes of Wrath* itself symbolises wrath against suppression, wrath against



hunger, wrath against political powers and wrath against the circumstances, which are deliberately imposed on Joads. The grapes turn away from the natural juice and are filled with anger. In the perverted nature grapes bear God's wrath, destructive and annihilating instead of life. Natural calamities are only the result of cumulative prevented human actions. The production of these grapes cannot satisfy the hunger but destroys humanity. Instead of satisfying hunger, they aggravate hunger and poison the social, moral, political, economic and spiritual system. The improvement in system cannot prevent it but human being must prevent his nature, problem must be nipped in the bud otherwise all efforts born of human wisdom would prove futile.

The novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, set during the great depression, focuses on the Joads, a poor family of sharecroppers driven from their Oklahoma home by draught, economic hardship, and changes in financial and agricultural industries. Due to their nearby hopeless situation and in part because they were trapped in the Dust Bowl, the Joads set out for California. Along with thousands of other "okies", they sought job, Land, dignity and a future.

A social group can be defined at the most general level as any set of human beings who either are, recently have been or anticipate being in some kind of inter relations. The term group, unit or social group has been used to designate many kinds of aggregation of humans. Aggregation of two members and aggregation that includes the total population of a large nation state have been called group or unit each individual occupies or perform social roles. A society is thus regarded as a system of differentiated roles and the position of individual in the society is in some sense a product of his various roles.

The open or closed nature of the class system has a powerful influence. It is not that the individual in a closed system will encounter great practical obstacles if he seeks to escape from his situation as a slave, serf or member of a lower caste. The ideology that upholds such a system and emphasizes the importance of everyone knowing his place tends to inhibit the development of personal talent and ambition at the lower level of the society.

Talented individuals in a lower class have to surmount many obstacles, arising mainly from poverty and the difficulties of access to education. On the other hand less talented individual are able to maintain their position in the upper class because of their inherited social advantages.

A human being plays an indispensable role in the society and the behaviours or reactions of human beings are governed by the forces of the society. It is the society, which governs the behaviour pattern of individual living in it. Karl Marx also believes that it is the forces of production which hold tightly the human relationship in the society. Money is an important factor in shaping the attitude of human being to live. Apart from material aspects there are emotional, spiritual and psychological factors also which give a proper shape to human predicament. Sometimes the unfulfilled desire of an individual goes into the deep consciousness and governs his behaviour either in a positive way that he wished and satisfied or in a negative manner that he lost in his own illusive and ruined himself. Mostly man becomes a victim of social forces against which he straggles with the certain values and norms of life.

So, for as the relationship of man being a part of society is concerned, it is dialectical. The struggle of man against social forces, like evils, political pressures, etc. is important to the normal growth of his development as well as the development of the society.

Besides the development on personal level of an individual the urge for social upliftment, devotion to nation and to religion also plays an important role in defining the behaviour of individuals and groups. Sacrifice is a very important factor in human relationship and can uplift man towards higher goals in life. Sacrifice shows the essential nobility of human behaviour and defines man's relationship with man in completely new dimensions. Social realism deals with problematic Steinbeck in society.

John Steinbeck novel *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the specific story of the Joad family in order to illustrate the hardship and oppression suffered by migrant labours and their great depression. It is an explicitly political tract that champions collectivist



action by the lower classes over expression of individualist self interest and chastises corporate and banking elites for short sighted policies meant to maximize profit even while forcing farmers into destitution and even starvation.

The novel begins with the description of the conditions in Dust Bowl Oklahoma that ruined the crops and instigated massive for closures on farmland. No specific character emerges initially, a technique that Steinbeck will return to several times in the book, juxtaposing descriptions of events in a larger social context with those more specific to the Joad family.

The narrative begins Just other Tom Joad is paroled from the McAlester prison for homicide. Tom Joad makes his way back to his family's from near Sallisaw in Oklahoma. He meets Jim Casy, a former preacher whom he remembers from his childhood, who has given up his calling out of a belief that all life is holy even the parts that are typically thought to be sinful and that sacredness consists simply in endeavouring to be an equal among the people. Jim accompanies Tom to his home, and when they arrive at his childhood farm home, they find it deserted. Disconcerted and confused, he and Casy meet their old neighbour, Muley Graves, who tells them that the banks have kicked all the farmers off their land, but he refuses to go. Tom and Casy get up the next morning to go to Uncle John's. There, Tom finds his family loading a converted Hudson truck with what remains of their possessions, the crops ever destroyed in the Dust Bowl and as a result, the family had to default on their loans. With their farm repossessed, the Joad cling to hope, mostly in the form of hand bills distributed every where in Oklahoma describing the fruitful country of California and the high pay to be had in that state. The Joads are seduced by this advertising and invest everything they have into the journey. Although leaving Oklahoma would be breaking parole, Tom decides that it is a risk worth taking. Casy joins the family as well.

Tom Joad finds the rest of his family staying with Uncle John, a morose man prone to depression after the death of his wife several years before. His mother is a strong, sturdy woman who is the moral

center of family life. His brother, Noah may have been brain damaged during childbirth, while his sister, Rose of Sharon (called Rosasharn by the family) is recently married and pregnant. Her husband, Connie Rivers, has dreams of studying radios. Tom's younger brother, Al is only sixteen and has the concerns befitting that age. This is followed by a more general description of the sale of item by impoverished families who intend to leave Oklahoma for California as the Joads expect to do.

Steinbeck uses the word 'dust' twenty seven times in three pages of first chapter, which symbolizes the spiritual barren waste land inside and outside the Joad family. Dust Bowl represents the death like state to which Joad family has been spiritually and morally reduced. The basic factor in Joad family is contraction of the self to its own shell and the expansion of selfish desire to achieve the fulfilment of the dream of a private Eden.

"Highway 66 is the main migrant road. 66 the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map from Mississippi to Baker's field over the red lands and the grey lands, twisting up into mountains, crossing the divide and down into the bright and terrible desert and across the desert to the mountains again and into the rich California valley". (89)

This mother road "The Road of flight" symbolizes the journey of humanity from a place of want to a place of prosperity. On the road, sometimes, they are received with kindness, sympathy and gifts and sometimes with cruelty and fear. When at last they reach the fertile land of California (the Eden of their dreams) they are disillusioned. The Land was fertile but the command of the Land was in the hands of impersonal peoples where labourers work at daily wages, which is not enough even for a day's food and they are beaten and ill treated if they show even the slightest sign of protest. Corruption is prevailing in the society. Food is expected to fill the coffers of the rich people and satisfy their insatiable hunger for gold at the price of thousands physically hungry people and their hungry families.

Almost immediately into the journey, the Joad family loses two members. The first victim is the



family dog, which is run over during their first top. The second is Granpa Joad, who dies of a stroke. The Wilson family helps the Joads when Granpa dies and the two families decide to make the journey to California together. Steinbeck follows this with a larger statement about the graving of a collective consciousness among the working class, who shift their perceptions from "I" to "We".

As the Joads near California they hear ominous rumours of a depleted Job market. One migrant tells Pa that 20,000 people show up for every 800 jobs and that his own children have starved to death.

Although the Joads on their first day in California proves tragic, as Granma Joads dies. The remaining members move from one squalid camp to the next, looking in vain for work, struggling to find food and trying desperately to hold their family together. Noah the oldest of the Joad children soon abandons the family as does Connie, a young dreamer who is married to Toms pregnant sister, Rose of Sharon.

He goes on to show that prevailing forces in the society one more responsible for the decay of mankind rather than external forces or natural calamities. The wrath of God has been seen in nature.

"Damp potatoes in the river and place guards along the bank to keep the hungry people from fishing them out.....There is a failure here that hopes all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree trunks, the sturdy trunk and the ripe fruit. And children dying...because fruit must rot must be forced to rot.....in the souls of the people "The Grapes of Wrath are filling and growing heavy growing heavy for vintage". (300).

God's wrath is natural because there is change in the mind of human being. production is for men but it is rotting in their souls. Unless love sweetens the souls and spiritual light shines there, the grapes are bound to be the grapes of wrath or rage.

Casy becomes a spokesman for the movement from "I" to "We" and assures a degree of leadership is it before he is cut down by the Landowners groan. It is the only Jim Casy who,

through meditation and observation, understand all human suffering as one. He is Christian figure in the novel. Through him Ma Joad and Tom gets an education of love and sacrifice, the central message of the novel.

The Joads meet with much hostility in California. The camps are overcrowded and full of starving migrants, who are often nasty to each other. The locals are fearful and angry at the flood of newcomers, whom they derisively label "Okies". Work is almost impossible to find or pays such a meager wage that a family's full day's work can not buy a decent meal. Fearing an uprising, the large landowners do everything in their power to keep the migrants poor and dependent.

The dreams, which loads the Joads to California is completely shattered now. But here is no loss of the spirit. The migrants have learned the value of corporate life through suffering. The family is unit now, but the common good comes before self and the family. Neither Casy nor Tom stands for the rebels. Casy preaches pure humanitarianism. Tom's dream of everybody working on the land is far from the concepts of commons. Tom dreams of achieving a society very much like the government camp at Weed and of ridding the present injustice of a million starving and the rich lands lying fallow.

"In the novel the movement of Migrant is from 'I' of each man for himself to the "We" where people partly out of desperation are driven to a unit"¹

In the end of the novel, the end of the cotton season means the end of work and word sweep across the land that there are no jobs to be had for three months. Rains set in and flood the land. The Joad family itself in distress is still willing to preserve the lives of others. Rose of Sharon gives birth to a still born child and Ma, desperate to get her family to safety from the floods, lead them to a dry barn not far away. There they find a young boy kneeling out his father, who is slowly starving to death. He has not eaten for days giving whatever food he had to his son. Realizing that Rose of Sharon is now producing milk, Ma sends the others outside, so that her daughter can nurse the dying man.

Her nurturing gesture has been seen a manifestation of Christian love. It is also humanitarian



attitude to help someone if you can even in the worst situation. Rose of Sharon is not a mother suckling her child; her baby was born dead, a blue shrivelled little mummy. The mysterious smile is a fit conclusion to the novel for it is in this affirmation of the power to give life and take it, to nourish even while surrounded by death and destruction.

Steinbeck has provided the unfledged realism and declining social, economic, political and spiritual conditions of that place. The sufferings of the people could not be under standable by the rich people.

"The fields were fruitful and starving men moved on the roads. The granaries were full and the children of the poor grew up rachitic and pustles of pellagra swelled on their sides. The great companies did not know that the live between hunger and anger in a thine line.....on the highways the people moved like ants and searched for work for food" (75)

The Grapes of Wrath is based on Steinbeck's personal experience, which he had during the depression years. It is the finest example of proletarian novel, which primarily deals with the life of working class problem from the point view of labour. He wants that people must understand the importance of human experience to be able to love and sympathize with other people. In the whole novel, Steinbeck tried to convey the significance of with the conception of group or togetherness. The only way to lesson the gravity of disaster is to share.

As the title suggests, the book was satirical and Steinbeck complained in a letter. "My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other and then I, deliberately write this book, the aim of which is to cause hatred through partial under standing".²

Steinbeck's social concern is reflected on almost every page of *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is his presentation to the contemporary socio-economic crises, through the break down of a single suffering family.

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