



CHRONOTOPICITY BURIED UNDER CHRONOMETRICITY: AN ESCHATOLOGICAL VIEW OF 'THE GRAPES OF WRATH' BY JOHN STEINBECK

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ABSTRACT



The poetics of contemporary fiction revolves around four axes:

1. History and post-histories
2. Time and Narrative
3. Body and genders
4. Writing and race

Among these, time and narrative have always been an arena of contention to literary critics. Conventional assumptions of time represented in literary works were in sharp contrast to real, lived experience of time represented in modernist fiction. This was perhaps the first movement towards the conception of time (history) being linked with space (society). The temporal is something that cannot be effectively separated from the lived experience of human beings (The spatial). The Bakhtinian 'chronotope' is the product of this inseparable integration of time (Chrono) and space (Tope).

This paper attempts to traverse the linear chronometricity of 'The Grapes of Wrath' by John Steinbeck in order to find an underlying chronotopicity prefigured by its obvious parallel to various books in The Bible and the explicit resemblances of certain symbols used in the novel to those in the Bible.

Keywords: *Chronometricity, Chronotopicity, Redemption.*

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The Bible presents the actual breaking of the body-the basic element of one's own notions of personality- that contributes to the concept of redemption of the people in search of the promised land. The lived experience of the suffering man in such a remote time and space as those of the Bible is not different from the actual experience of human condition now worldwide. In an age of free market principle that caters only to our unthinking drive after money and profit, human beings in large groups are forced to go on exile (and in search of Promised Land) from the land where they built up their lives through generations of toil and trouble. Jim Casy (JC) in the novel exudes the sacrificial, prophetic and redemptive vigour of Jesus Christ. With his murder the analogy becomes complete. He can certainly be titled as 'Alter Christus'-another Christ.

The picture of the lactating mother trying to revive the dying man by breastfeeding him is another dimension of the redemptive nature of love and compassion preached by Christ. This, of course, reminds us of Pieta, the picture of Mother Mary carrying the dead body of her son. Mary is titled as the co-redemptor by the Church.

The thrust of this paper is on how human condition, irrespective of time and space is the same and how human beings who undertake prophetic or messianic mission transcend time and space.

CHRONOMETRICITY VERSUS CHRONOTOPICITY IN THE NOVEL

There is only one reference to the clock-time though the novel can be said to be a progressive journey from one point (of time and space) to another point (of time and space). The novel describes the eviction of the Joads from their farmland in Oklahoma, their consequent movement to California and how they had to move from one place to another in California itself. Narration of this movement is, to all appearances, linear subscribing to the conventionality of telling a story. It is this conventional, absolute form of time involved in the narration of any linear history that can be denoted as 'chronometricity'. The concept of chronometricity is made clear by the political theorist Dan Thu Nguen in his 'The Speculation of Metric Time':

"As gradually all countries began to adopt the time zone system based on the prime meridian of Greenwich, the specifically Western temporal regime which had emerged with the invention of the clock in medieval Europe became the universal standard of time measurement. Indeed, its hegemonic deployment signified the irreversible destruction of all other temporal regimes in the world, the last vestiges of which remain only in the form of historical and anthropological curiosities.

No longer determined by either organic or cosmic cycles of time, 'Greenwich time' is a mathematical fiction which signals the collapse of human experience of space and time into a mathematical formula..." (p.33)

The Joad family, as many others in the novel do refer to time, never by clock but by the rising/setting sun, by observing and listening to umpteen indications from nature. A particularly noteworthy reference to time that potentially sabotages the linearity of narration is quotable here.

" ' I seen the ducks today,' he said, ' wedging south -high up.An' I seen blackbirds a-setting' on the wires, an the doves was on the fences.' Ma opened her eyes and looked at him.He went on:'I seen a little whirlwin', like a man a-spinnin' acrost a-fiel.' An' the ducks drivin' on down,wedgin' on down southward'. Ma smiled. 'Remember?' she said. Remember what we'd always say at home? " winter's a-comin' early." I wonder what we meant.

'I seen the blackbirds on the wires' said Pa. 'Settin' so close together. An' the doves. Nothin' sets so still as a dove—on the fence wires—maybe two, side by side. An' this little whirlwin'-big as a man, an dancin' off acrost a fiel'. Always did like the little fellas, big as a man.'

'Wisht I wouldn't think how it is home' said Ma. 'It ain't our home no more. Wisht I'd forget it. An' Noah....

Pa pointed at the sky. 'Look-more ducks. Big bounce. An' Ma, "Winter's a-comin' early."



She chuckled. 'They's things you do. An' you don' know why.' (The Grapes of Wrath, p.297.)

They go back in time to reconstitute themselves at the critical juncture of their son leaving them on their way to California. Mrs. Joad certainly feels the family is falling apart. The conversation quoted above is part of her declaration as to how she would fix the retreating figure of Noah, their son in her recollection. She tries to equate Noah's figure with various features of the landscape from which he was moving away. Along with this, the serenity of the past with its pastoral and rural settings is recalled in the conversation. Reference to the season 'winter' and their reminiscences as to how they once anticipated winter subscribe to the underlying anti-linear, anti-chronometric nature of the narrative and points its directions towards the cyclical and organic nature which constitutes their identities. As modern man is a prey to the Leviathans of conventional time and space to which he surrenders his rationality and let his subjectivity subsumed by them, he is unable to comprehend (They's things you do, an you don know why') how space/time continuum becomes an integral part of being human.

The signposts of the novel to the direction of viewing human being with a propensity for a universal dimension irrespective of time and space can lead a conscientious reader to the Bakhtinian chronotope and its implications to the novel's thematic concern which is essentially human suffering and man's quest for liberation/redemption. Pearce states:

"In the literary artistic chonotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Pearce – p.67)

Chronometricity is undermined by the novel's presentation of suffering human beings (of course, caused by a particular time and space namely, the Great Depression of the 1930's in America and the loss of lands to a large number of farmers in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Texas and the neighbouring states) who transcend their time and

space, who in quest of the fulfillment of their bare minimum needs are eternally on the move. They are themselves time /space which is part of their being. The novel is replete with references which equate landscape with human beings. One such reference is as follows:

"This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us" (The Grapes of Wrath p.81)

The land that they left behind them is what crated them. That is what they are now. It is here that one notices the inextricable link between time and space. It is not only the land that they left behind but it is also time (their past) that they had to leave. It is that land and that past (their life) that they are in search of. Time and space are concretized as one entity in them. This is equivalent to stating that chronotope in the novel is human beings and their inevitable responses to their condition. The applicability of the universal nature of chronotopicity in the novel is emphasized by the narrator's remembrance of how the land was grabbed by his grandfather from the Indians.

"Grampa took their land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away" (The Grapes of Wrath, p.32)

Many other references to the Indians who were once hunted out of their lands and some comments that equate the family's present status with that of the Negroes point to the fact of the universality of human condition/suffering. If the novel is juxtaposed with its substructure – The Bible – the aspect of universality becomes obvious.

THE CARNIVALESQUE NATURE OF CHRONOTOPICITY IN THE NOVEL

Jago Morrison, while explicating different aspects of the Bakhtinian chronotope states thus:

"The Dialogic Imagination argues that, in the wake of 'the dissolution of the medieval world view' (p.205) in which the theological doctrine of The Last Judgement had been so dominant, a fundamentally new conception of time and space was needed, which could 'permit one to link real life (history) to real earth. It was necessary to oppose to eschatology a creative and generative time,



a time measured by creative acts, by growth and not by destruction'(p.206).

It is to popular folklore that Bakhtin looks in search of this new chronotope, showing how carnival instituted itself as an antidote to the ordered, official culture of medieval society." (Morrison—p.37)

If chronotope integrates time and space into one—the lived experience of human beings— it challenges the conventional assumptions of absolute, abstract time instituted by hegemonic structures of society and its institutions. It is this challenge that is materialized in expressions of carnival— the flouting of authority, critiquing of accepted notions of morality and religion that we find in various societies at various times. Thus chronotope turns out to be at least a potential motif of different forms of carnival, if it is not one itself.

All forms of resistance to oppression and all means employed by the migrant farmers in the novel to survive are carnivalesque. Religion, state and other social institutions are connived together to exploit the poor, the dispossessed and the novel presents to the reader many occasions where established religious views and the laws of the land are overtly or covertly flouted. The sacrilegious nature of carnival to pollute whatever is held sacrosanct by institutions of power and pelf is very explicit in the novel.

PREACHING OF A GOSPEL OF LIBERATION/REDEMPTION THROUGH COMMUNION

Eschatology is defined by M.H.Abrams thus: "the events that are to come in "the last days" of Christ's judgement and the life after death of individual souls." (Page—133)

Christian eschatology is founded on the concept of the fallen man and his sin, atonement to sin and redemption. That the novel has as its substructure the Bible is ample evidence for its eschatological affiliations. Yet it is to be noted here that though the mould of the novel is that of the Bible and of Christian eschatology it has none of their teleological presumptions. It is more in tune with the Movement of Liberation Theology which declared 'God takes sides, sides of the oppressed'. The Bible is the history of the progressive, onward march of

mankind towards its definite redemption through the interference of God. It is basically like the conventional history that presumes history to be an onward movement towards a grand civilization. The linearity inscribed in the very nature of conventional history is seen in the Bible also. Christian eschatology founded on the Bible envisages very clearly the finality of The Last Judgement due on Christ's Second Coming.

The novel on the other hand, states through Jim Casy (formerly a preacher in the traditional vein and the pronunciation of whose initials has phonic resemblance with the name, Jesus.):

"May be it ain't a sin. May be it's just the way folk is...There ain't no sin and ther ain't no virtue. Ther's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say." (The Grapes of Wrath, Page-23)

It is not sin that mankind is to be redeemed from but from the actual lived experience of bondage and suffering which is ultimately the human condition—the chronotope. This doctrine of sin/sinlessness runs parallel to what Christian eschatology holds to be sin and redemption from it but both leads to the concept of universal love and in the case of the novel love and compassion for all human beings is the result of the conviction that all being is one. In Jim Casy's own words,

"...maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit—the human sprerit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's part of." (The Grapes of Wrath, Page-24)

It is the Gospel of communion that Jim Casy preaches as the redemptive sacrament for the human condition. His living of this Gospel is at its zenith in the scene where he is murdered. He is killed because he sowed the seeds of communion among people who were stranded on a foreign land. His response to the murderer " You fellas don' know what you are doin'. You are helping to starve kids" (The Grapes of Wrath, Page—354) clearly echoes Jesus' words on the cross ' Forgive them ,Father, for they know not what they are doing".



So also are uncle John and Mrs.Joad in the novel. Uncle John, through his severe sense of guilt and sin, is at times in bouts of depression. As an atonement to what he considers to be his sin he does some charitable works like feeding the starving children. He is a loner only because his sense of communion is founded on his purely religious conviction of right and wrong. Towards the end of the novel Uncle John is almost on the path of reconciliation with himself. This is evident from what he states while placing the stillborn on floodwaters:

“ Go down in the street an’ rot an’ tell ‘em that way Tha’s the way you can talk” (*The Grapes of Wrath*, Page—78).

What is the message exactly that the child should convey? John Fontenrose explicates the message thus:

“ What message? It is given in Chapter twenty-Five : oranges,corn potatoes, pigs are destroyed to keep prices up, though millions of people need them. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange” (Fontenrose, Page- 78)

Dialogue (exemplified here through sending a message in the form of a stillborn infant) is the first step of mediation for communion between two warring parties. Thus Uncle John also realizes the need for communion not only among the oppressed but between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Mrs.Joad in the novel is the one factor that keeps the family together through all hardships that they had to encounter. Joseph Fontenrose comments:

“ Shortly after lamenting that the family was breaking up, Ma Joad, the soul of the family, attained a larger vision, agreeing with Mrs Wainwright that the Joads would help the Wainwrights if they needed help.”(Fotenrose, Page-74)

In Mrs.Joad’s own words “ Use’ ta be the famby fust.It ain’t so now .It is anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do” (*Grapes of Wrath*, Page-408)

It is the family unity and strength imparted to the larger unit.

The final scene where Rose of Sharon, Mrs.Joad’s daughter breastfeeds the starving adult

man is significant in many ways. One aspect that the scene concretizes is that of redemption/liberation through communion. Joseph Fontenrose while commenting on the scene stresses its potentiality thus:

“ The epicode has not only folkloristic and literary antecedents.....but for Steinbeck it is an oracular image forecasting in moment of defeat and despair the final triumph of the people- a contingent forecast, for only if the people nourish and sustain one another will they achieve their ends. More than that the episode represents the novel’s most comprehensive thesis, that is all life is one and holy....” (Fontenrose ,Page-69)

In primitive adoption rituals , the adopting mother gives her breast to the child being adopted. Here Rose of Sharon, the mother of the stillborn adopts the adult man, the representative of her own people. The Eucharist, otherwise known as the Holy Communion in Christian theology is what nourishes the soul and keeps united the mystic body of the Church. It is a foretaste of the heavenly bliss. Rose of Sharon’s breastfeeding the adult man thus turns out to be a symbol both of communion and redemption. The redemptive vigour of this gesture is to be materialized in the actual lived experience of human beings.

Rose of Sharon in the last scene is Janus-faced: on one side she has the face of Pieta, Mother Mary carrying the dead body of Jesus Christ on her lap (Rose of Sharon carries the stillborn) despondent and dejected, on the other side, she has the face of Mary, the co- redemptor (in Church terminology) who both imparts and takes part in the heavenly bliss. The narrator describes the scene, thus ending the novel:

“She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes.Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. “You got to,” she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. “There”! She said.”There” Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved



gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously". (The Grapes of Wrath, Page-416)

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN YOU.

The novel is a statement of how essentially the chronotope, the human condition is the one anathema from which redemption or liberation is possible through communion. The Kingdom of God or the Promised Land is one that has to be created in the midst of the fret and fury of life. When this is not pursued by mankind collectively it certainly has to face "the great wine press of the wrath of God"(Revelation 14:19) which is alluded to in the title of the novel . The Divine wrath experienced through the Grapes of Wrath (The wrath of the people in bondage and suffering) is constructive leading one to liberation and redemption.

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