

Racial Discrimination And Economic Inequality In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath*

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Abstract: *The present paper studies the theme of racial discrimination and economic inequality in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. *The Grapes of Wrath* portrays the plight of the working class during the Great Depression (1929). It highlights the problems faced by the farmers and migrant workers. The novel exposes the dehumanized and anti-people nature of the American economy, especially the financial institutions. The story is about the agricultural labourers whose livelihood has been taken away by machines and technology. They became jobless and shorn of resources for their survival. It is a story of the dispossessed Oklahoma family and their struggle to carve out a new life in California at the height of the Great Depression. Steinbeck is not openly calling for revolution or relying entirely on attacking the rich or supporting the poor; he is merely struggling to find a way to illustrate the necessity of one man to be willing and able to rely on another for support. The present paper focuses on the plight of economically underprivileged sections of society during the Great Depression era.*

Keywords: *Socioeconomic disparity, economic inequality, racial discrimination, and inhumanity*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Grapes of Wrath portrays the plight of the working class during the Great Depression (1929). It highlights the problems faced by the farmers and migrant workers during the Great Depression. The novel exposes the dehumanized and anti-people nature of the American economy, especially the financial institutions. The story is about the agricultural laborers whose livelihood has been taken away by machines and technology. They became jobless and shorn of resources for their survival. It is a story of the dispossessed Oklahoma family and their struggle to carve out a new life in California at the height of the Great Depression.

Throughout the novel, the narrative focuses first on the broader history behind those who owned and took over the land in the West. However, he also focuses on the specific experiences of the Okies, who are forced to move west due to the selfishness of the greedy landowners. Here, the narrator suggests that these landowners are blind to this cycle of history. Instead, they think themselves exceptional because of their sturdy grip on others weaker than they are because of their ability to erase the dignity of their workers. But the narrator points out that the desire to rebel against unjust power never goes away: it is a defining fact of human history.

The Grapes of Wrath: A Reflection of Racial Discrimination and Economic Inequality

Steinbeck describes the tense relationship between the landowners or "owner men" and the tenant farmers in this novel. The landowners can direct the tenant farmers when they must leave the land to get more profit. Here, the landowners may be more potent than the farmers, but they are also caught in extensive processes directed by far-away multinational corporations.

Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold. And all of them were caught in something larger than themselves (Steinbeck 31).

Steinbeck has extensively shown sympathy for the working class and their struggles in his writing. He responded to the Great Depression through his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck focuses on a low-income family of sharecroppers. They struggle to adjust to the shifting economy, the drought, and other hardships created by the Great Depression. He tells the story of the harsh realities of life for poor, unskilled workers displaced by the Great Depression – the most significant economic decline and high unemployment in Western industrialized nations. "*The Grapes of Wrath* is the manifestation of his exquisite literary sensibility with a focus on the socioeconomic survey of the time with the degree of consciousness of the workers to demand wages commensurate with their workforce." (Prakash, 44)

The book's perspective has switched to tenant farmers preparing to leave for California and to one who is disillusioned by the process of selling his belongings: his tools are now useless because of new technology. He feels that he is now just as broken. Some treat California in the book as a marvellous land of opportunity; it is a place to recover some of the agency and stability that the tenant farmers have lost in Oklahoma.

This farmer, however, begins to feel as though California is not just a random choice but a useless one. He believes that wherever he and his fellow farmers go, they will be pursued by the sense of hopelessness that has defined their work until now. If there is any sliver of hope left, it's in the fact that there are so many people like this that they make up "armies of bitterness," a group of people bound by shared experiences even if those experiences are desperate. "To California or any place—everyone a drum major is leading a parade of hurts, marching with our bitterness. And someday—the armies of bitterness will all be going the same way. And they'll all walk together, and there'll be a dead terror from it" (Steinbeck 88).

Here the narrator describes specific changes occurring due to technological progress coming to replace humans with tractors and other machines on the farms of Oklahoma. By creating distance between the land and the person using it, between labor and its means, the narrator suggests that such changes alienate people from the very source of their stability and livelihood. As technology continues to distance people from their sources of wealth and resources, the narrator suggests, people come to look scornfully at this land, failing to understand the mutual interdependence between humans and the environment. The spread of technology does not only mean that vast landscapes will be transformed into ugly, barren outdoor factories, useless except for the money that can be extracted from them. Besides this, it means that people themselves will feel less strongly a sense of humanity in their connection to the place they live.

That man who is more than his chemistry, walking on the earth, turning his plow point for a stone, dropping his handles to slide over an outcropping, kneeling in the earth to eat his lunch; that man who is more than his elements knows the land that is more than its analysis.

But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself (Steinbeck 115-116).

Steinbeck suggests that the story he is writing is only one part of a more extended history through these powerful lines. His characters may seem desperate and dehumanized continuously. Their experiences may be in some ways unique, but in other ways, their lives fit into a narrative about progress, resistance, and struggle for human rights and recognition. The book itself might not include any revolutions or even political battles, but these remain in the background, relevant to everything else that happens.

And the great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know a great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands, it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold, they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed (Steinbeck 238).

As the situation of the migrant farmers becomes more desperate, the book states, these people no longer seem like real people, or even like farmers, but rather begin to be defined solely as migrants torn from their homes and unable to settle into a new home. The "great companies" described here are eager to squeeze out as much work as possible from the migrants, who cannot support themselves or their families with meagre earnings. Instead, they grow hungrier and hungrier. The companies believe this hunger to be something manageable. Indeed, they may even think that desire makes these people more docile and less willing to rise against the unjust forces affecting their lives. What the narrator suggests, however, is that hunger is not something meek and quiet but rather another kind of wrath. And in this book, of course, wrath can be mighty and valuable, a force that can provoke change and remind characters that they are alive enough to fight. "The great companies did not know that the line between hunger and anger is a thin line" (Steinbeck 284).

Steinbeck describes when there is a good harvest, and too much food is left over after the expected supply is picked and dispatched, the business owners don't want there to be too high an amount, or else prices will go down, and they'll risk losing money. So, for them, it is even too much a business risk to allow the farmers to collect the food that remains for their use.

This refusal seems to change the businessmen's actions from a merely wise business strategy to an attitude meant precisely to dehumanize the workers, to emphasize their powerlessness at the hands of those who hire them. The workers are forced to watch the potatoes, oranges, and pigs be destroyed without doing anything. This sense of despair, and not only the shocking gap between the overabundance of food and the hungry, but weak farmers also that are responsible for picking it, makes the "souls of the people" so heavy. The final line of this passage gives the book its title. The sentence uses a metaphor of wine vineyards, appropriate given the cultivation work of these migrant workers, to describe a growing feeling of despair and anger among them. Like the grapes that grow heavy as harvest approaches, these workers too are building up their wrath to an unknown but inevitable point in the future at which they will no longer be able to stand what they are forced to experience. The people come with nets to fish for potatoes in the river, and the guards hold them back; they come in rattling cars to get the dumped oranges, but the kerosene is sprayed. And they stand still and watch the potatoes float by, listen to the screaming pigs being killed in a ditch and covered with quick lime, watch the mountains of oranges slop down to a putrefying ooze; and in the eyes of the people, there is the failure, and in the eyes of the hungry, there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people, the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage (Steinbeck 349).

"*The Grapes of Wrath* is more widely accepted as a radical novel, but the emerging mysticism concerning the phalanx that Steinbeck ascribes to his more leftist characters simultaneously serves to uphold the rift between him and the more traditional radical novelists." (Jasinski 29-30)

In the article "Grapes of Wrath, the Outcome of Steinbeck's Rage," Ragina Williams talks about the life of immigrants in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: The book's primary motivation was to expose the exploitation of the Okies and make his reader just as angry as he was. His anger stemmed from the fact that business owners, landowners, and even the average middle class seemed to ignore that the Okies were people. Some saw them make a bigger profit, others as a nuisance, and still others as dirty diseased and the reason for their tax increase. Steinbeck's earlier work in journalism that led him around California covering stories about the immigrants, left him not only with anger but with an overabundance of source material for his novel. (Williams 6)

2. CONCLUSION

The Grapes of Wrath is a social document, a record of drought conditions, economic problems, and sharecropping lives of those living and working on the land. Steinbeck "s vision of collectivity is not based on an organized division of labor and property but rather on a nuclear agreement between human beings that ensure they each receive as much as they need and are happy with that amount. Steinbeck is not openly calling for revolution or relying entirely on attacking the rich or supporting the poor; he is merely struggling to find a way to illustrate the necessity of one man to be willing and able to rely on another for support.

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