

Voice of Experience in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

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Abstract

John Steinbeck was a great writer of experience first and then of words. He was a pragmatic thus believed and learned from experiences. Experience is his passion. He observed with humanity focusing on human struggles with the forces of nature around him and the passions within him. With this background, the beauty and power of the Californian land and the hardships he experienced were exposed. *The Grapes of Wrath* is the product of his experience. John Steinbeck's social reforms in association with labour relation are evaluated in this article.

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John Steinbeck's social reforms in association with labour relation are evaluated in this article. Steinbeck's concern on migrant agricultural workers of California is discussed as well. Novel influences realistic elements which make it real. Steinbeck's one major work on agriculture labour relation in California is *The Grapes of Wrath*. Since this novel deals with a social issue it is also termed to be social novel. A brief history of migrant labour in California is added for the clear understanding of the background of the novel. In this novel he has described the events relating labour force directly relates real incidents. This study is reasonable because of the award of Pulitzer Prize for *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1940.

The Grapes of Wrath explores the migrated refugees in the green fields of California. They are thousands from the Middle West with three four generations. The sad

story describes their hopes, courage, and disillusionment. He says Joad's family story to make the situation reach to American people. The readers are encouraged by Steinbeck to identify themselves with the Joad family.

California is a place of large scale agriculture. They need huge workers to have the large-scale farming methods but, aimed labours for less pay. Filipinos and Japanese are most common workers in field and white migrants are employed plant works during the harvests. The migrants began to organize which results badly due to wage demands. Thus, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, explores the inhuman treatment of migrated workers by California employers. He wrote this novel, only after experiencing and performing farm labour at federal migrant camps Central California.

John Steinbeck's birth and childhood was in the agricultural area of California where the novel's setting falls. Evolutionary development of the land was personally witnessed by Steinbeck. Land areas are converted into farming land, predominantly for vegetable cultivation which creates demand for large numbers of transient workers with whom Steinbeck worked and experienced their pain. So it is evident that Steinbeck's familiarity with the migrants made him to contribute this novel.

Three phenomena are extracted after analysing the history of agriculture in California. Land is owned by a few wealthy owners, great variety of crops and requirement of large labour. Until 1860 the situation was good till wheat became popular. Machines were introduced and only little labour expected for harvest. By 1890, California was the second highest state in wheat production. The seasonal demand for labour had appeared, and white migratory workers, the part of California farming arrived. In 1886 the Proceedings of the State Agricultural Society stated:

Our nomadic herds of farm hands must have all theyear employment and an abiding place with their work; they must be fed and housed as civilized men should be fed and housed; the wide gap between employed and unemployed must be closed.

After 1870, wheat price dropped and to orchard crops. Harvest time reached thus demand for transient labour increased. Foreign migrant groups filled this need. Chinese, Japanese and Pilipino entered California. These people shared some characteristics. They are poor, foreign, no families to care for. They were vulnerable and exploited. But laws supported the exploiters. They were not provided with accommodation, food and dress. At the same time they are not in a position to make an organised committee to demand their needs like higher wages, accommodation and permanent jobs.

Wages was very less, but when these people reached California they were penniless. So even mean wages gave them a temporary relief. It is evident that migrant families had trouble even to exist on such meagre pay. Accommodation is yet another issue. They lived in temporary tents near the harvest area and return home after the seasonal job. Mexicans followed this but Okies community people stayed even after. So the government tried to do some arrangements for them. Low cost housing and migration camps were arranged. These camps were similar to the one described in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and provided wooden tent platforms, toilets, showers, laundry facilities, and hot and cold water “the camps provide migratory workers, for the first time, with an adequate supply of decent drinking water and proper sanitation.” (Steinbeck 11)

Race prejudice, developed among the fellow countrymen. The supressed migrants organise an organisation to give voice against these violence and Communism flowered in California. The members of this organisation were known as “bankers in overalls”. The social

novel of John Steinbeck seeks the attention of whole world and flourished the shameful labour conditions prevailed in author's native California. He is a writer of protest. In history all periods has experienced social injustice and poverty. Steinbeck period also had such dispute in California. He experienced economic depletion due to industrial revolution. This reflects his writings. He voiced for common man by portraying the weakness of such through his fictional characters. He reproduced the voice of labour class faithfully.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* he expounded his theory of 'the group being superior to the individual'.

I lost my land (...) I am alone and bewildered. And in the night one family camps in a ditch and another family pulls in and the tents come out. The two men squat on their hams and the women and children listen.... Keep these two squatting men apart (...) for here "I lost my land" is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate - "We lost our land." The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one.(Steinbeck 13)

The Joad family tries for unification with other families but finally separated.

Steinbeck has written an article which act as a synopsis for *The Grapes of Wrath* describing refugees and his support. Steinbeck outlines the manner, by which the great owners got all the property into their hands and squeezed the small owners, and he stated his belief, "And the companies, the banks worked at their own doom and they did 'not know it.'"(Steinbeck 36) As in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the local towns' people were often in favour of the federal camps, but the Associated Farmers consistently opposed them. John Steinbeck, who had lived in one, saw them as an example of what could be done for his poor "Okies". "Okies" are people who migrated from Oklahoma to California during the Great Depression.

The Joads and other migrant suffer a lot in California. Steinbeck exposes angry for this state and advocates resistance to the “great owners” who exploit the migrant workers. He strongly condemns the economic system that has impoverished the Joads, declaring: “There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success.” (Steinbeck 67) In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck refers to ‘Route 66’ this is a road connecting Los Angeles to Chicago considered to be the “Mother Road”. Steinbeck portrays the captured image of the road and turns it into a cultural icon. The fictional Joad family of the novel was an example of the thousands of people migrating to California to escape the despair of the Dust Bowl states, and many used Route 66. “66 is the mother road,” Steinbeck wrote, “the road of flight.” (Steinbeck 37)

The Grapes of Wrath's portrayal brought out the reality of the nation. The target group employed negative reaction to escape the situation. The Associated Farmers of California charged the novel as a “pack of lies” and “communist propaganda”. For a short period of time this book was banned in Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin. Steinbeck experienced death threats for publishing this novel. He was under the surveillance of foreign bureau of investigation. Many libraries and towns across America symbolically burned this novel. WB Camp in California is one of the largest cotton producing camp in California, similar one in the novel as well, he said: “We are angry, not because we were attacked but because we were attacked by a book obscene in the extreme sense of the word.”

While writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck visited Arvin Federal Government Camp near Bakersfield, portrayed as “Weedpatch Camp” in the novel. The camp is still used by migrant workers. Weedpatch, the settlement provided for the immigrants accommodated many families and Joad's family is one. They were happy at first, but no work and food. They

starved in the midst of plenty. "There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize... And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates - died of malnutrition - because the food must rot, must be forced to rot." (Steinbeck 41) He continued it with emotional words stating: "... 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 42) The family spend nearly one month in Weedpatch with only one employed for less pay. Finally they left the federal camp to Hooper Range and work inside a fenced compound which has no water and toilet facility even.

Deaths and sufferings due to drought is very cruel. Grampa Joad's death is the first followed by Granma many died before reaching California. Nothing to eat in native land they started their journey with hope of life in search of little water. Even Rose of Sharon suffers from this long journey and shows her humanity to save others from death when she offers her milk to a dying man. Even in the deadly situation hope was very high. Tom is a best example for this. Ma's dream of having a home and Rose of Sharon's hope of having a movie theatre at the new place are some signs of optimism during the time of hopelessness. The below quot is the evident for hope: "Women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole. The women went into the houses to their work, and the children began to play, but cautiously at first." (Steinbeck 7)

Steinbeck records events after events that happened in camps as well as California in common. His novel fulfilled his aim by carrying the message all over the world. It was decided that John Steinbeck was a success as a social reformer because he saw the deplorable conditions of the migrant workers; he was appalled, and spoke out against the situation in

print to a large audience; and his objections to the frightful treatment of the workers aroused the national conscience and resulted in a great improvement in farm labour conditions in California.

References

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