

THE SEAMY SIDE OF AMERICAN CAPITALISM IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to study Steinbeck's vision of the American system of capitalism during 1930's as causing the greatest economic crisis in American history. The study particularly observes the growth of materialistic values in this era. The main discussion concerns the dramatic journey of Joad's family toward California as reflected in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

With an interdisciplinary approach, the study examines the novel to comprehend the author's view about his social phenomena. This is a kind of qualitative research in which the researcher applied library research on *The Grapes of Wrath*. The data gathered from bibliographical sources was analyzed and written descriptively to describe the seamy side of capitalism in America.

The result of this research shows that material success is not the human's only orientation in his life. The great depression and tragic life of Oklahoma tenant farmers were viewed by the author as due to the impact of uncontrolled American Capitalism in 1930's. The seamy sides of American Capitalism such as greed, selfishness, corruption, and consumptive behavior, etc. have been described by the author as source of the extensive destruction among American people.

Keywords: capitalism, the great depression, materialism, dehumanization.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1885 and 1920, America was the leading industrial capitalist country. In the early years of industrialization, American industry had still been noted by monopoly in local areas that avoided competition through high cost transportation. Thirty-five years after the civil war, the trading competition, as part of the spirit of capitalism, began to spread in American industry. Only a few cases had industry become dominant, instead there were many small and medium industries that grew and developed (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2009).

In the decade of the 1920s, Americans experienced new technologies, including radios, cars, movie theaters, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators,

and telephones. Women found more freedom to go out to work or attend university. Most people had jobs and money to spend, and they spent it having a good time. Because of this release from the miseries of the war, the period was known as the "Roaring Twenties,"

Wealthy socialites often went to nightclubs to eat, listen to live music, and dance. "The Twenties" was probably only roaring for a small fraction of free thinking individuals. By the 1930s much of that new morality had calmed down, as a generation of restless, postwar young people grew up. (McNeese, 2010, p.88)

After a decade of optimism and prosperity, the United States fell into depression on

Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929, the day the stock market crashed and the Great Depression officially began. As stock prices fell with no hope of recovery, panic struck. Masses of people tried to sell their stock, but no one was buying. The stock market, which had appeared to be the surest way to become rich, quickly became the path to bankruptcy (Burg, 2005).

The Great Depression that occurred in the 1930's encouraged intellectuals and artists to respond to such phenomenon. Many works of art emerged reflecting the bitterness and concern of the American people that were experiencing poverty and unemployment. One of the phenomenal works which appeared as a concerned response to those Oklahoma people migrating to California was *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel by John Steinbeck.

The hard life of the American people, especially in Oklahoma, in the 1930's caused by The Great Depression and Dust Bowl disasters was clearly depicted by John Steinbeck. The writer also showed the unfairness experienced by tenant farmers as result of the American economic system at that time, Capitalism, the system that was run by the bourgeois class and land lords. Thus critical depictions were considered by literary critics as a criticism and protest toward American capitalism in the decade of the 1930's (Shillinglaw, 2011).

This study is concerned with the experiences and ideology of the author, his viewpoints toward American capitalism, and the seamy sides of American Capitalism as portrayed in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative research. John Creswell defined qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, report detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (as cited in Emzir, 2010).

The researcher applied library research on *The Grapes of Wrath* novel. According to Semi (1993), library research is a research that is done in the researcher office himself, or in a library in which he/she found the data and information about his/her research through many books, or other audiovisual equipment. The primary data were from Steinbeck novels, essays, articles, autobiography, letters, and even notes. Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* will serve as the literary text, which the study is based. While the secondary data are the supporting resources, it was collected from related and trusted documents such as books, journal, periodicals, and newspaper which contain the topic discussed.

Then, the data gathered from bibliographical sources were analyzed and written descriptively to describe the seamy side of capitalism in America. Thus, the research found the expressions of John Steinbeck criticism toward the seamy side of American capitalism through his novel story in the form of words or sentences that used by the author.

DISCUSSION

John Steinbeck was an American Novelist whose books and works, including his masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath*, usually related to social and economic issues. He was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas,

California, a cattle and wheat town with 2500 people at the turn of the century. It was a town that had grown up at a crossroads near the end of a narrow valley pinched long ways into California's coastal mountains (Benson, 2006).

In most of his works, Steinbeck took a true figure as a major theme. He shows the poor, oppressed, and unfair life through calm, sympathetic, and heroic characters. According to Mangunwijaya (1988), Steinbeck's works have the populist favor. He radically expressed his posture toward the American social condition as if he was not American. He looked like an American Indian from *Marhaen* class that used works of art to represent the dream of rebellion.

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, is read not only for entertainment but also as a reputable source of information about the dust bowl disaster, American Great Depression, and the brutality of American capitalism result and its affect on tenant farmers and migrant laborers during the 20th century. Steinbeck used the novel to reflect on the American social condition and his sympathy by transforming the reality into fiction. The laborers regarded Steinbeck as their spokesman and the novel as their manifesto. On other hand, the landowners and administrators considered *The Grapes of Wrath* as part of communist propaganda (Jack, 1939).

The story of *The Grapes of Wrath* identifies the side of capitalism, which Steinbeck protests. He illustrated another side of Capitalism full of uncontrolled, savage, amoral, and inhumane behavior. However, it does not mean that Steinbeck is a socialist since he owned big ranches. The practice of capitalism that he fought is the one that allowed the owners to do everything to

enrich their own selves, including seizing the rights and property of the poor.

When Steinbeck's book was published in 1939, he was criticized for being communist and socialist. It was because his works depicted the government camps in the novel and within the novel he introduced the idea that people should work together for the common good. Thus, although he radically criticized capitalism, he also showed that the workers, in the *Dubois Battle*, were manipulated by labor organizers and corporate farmers as the agents of socialism.

The suspicion of Steinbeck for being a communist was confirmed by his first trip to Soviet Union in 1947 as a journalist. Steinbeck's works and travels brought him into frequent contact with labor organizations, strikers, and communists but he also criticized their activities. He was not a formal member of socialism, nor communism or other political organizations.

Based on his novel's topic, Steinbeck can be categorized as a proletarian writer. Proletarian writer is a creative artist who concerns himself with the lower classes, with the stuff of proletarian writing. He, Steinbeck, laid himself open to criticism, usually in the form of either disgust or enthusiasm, on the score of subject matter. He also named this "apostle of reform," an inciter of revolution because of milieu and setting (Jones, 1940).

Throughout his careers and works, Steinbeck's concerns with the working class and marginalized people were the visible stories for international readers. Steinbeck used realistic depictions of working class people in authentic settings to politically charge his work. By examining his works through the working class perspective, it

finds that a wealth of working class themes embedded in the social commentary that runs throughout his works. The stories took source from his social observation that is best illustrated in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Mays, 2013).

However, economic prosperity was considered as the sign of success of the American system of capitalism, but this enjoyment of life and leisure also had negative consequences in the value and morality of American people. These consequences simultaneously appeared with the crisis of economy that is familiar to Americans in the Great Depression.

Material Success and Monetary Wealth Based Values

According to Ryan and Dziurawiec (2001), this desire of pursuing material was recently associated with by the term of materialism. However, acquisitive desires have appeared since the ancient civilization. Belk (1984) described materialism as the substance that ownership plays in an individual's life. Still according to Belk, at the highest level of materialism ownerships suppose the innermost place in an individual's life. It is also believed by materialists that materialism could be a means of providing satisfaction.

Steinbeck in this novel discovers the money and profit-oriented lifestyle in his government and society. The critique is an attempt to condemn the behaviors which only consist in satisfying one's financial desires. According to Steinbeck, this is believed to have affects on the government's economic policies and incites people to be selfish, greedy, and show contempt for gracious human moral qualities such as altruism, dignity, and solidarity.

Consequently, the material success will only then seek social success and will regulate everything exclusively in terms of material prosperity and earthly satisfaction.

Steinbeck was disappointed with American materialism that inculcated a sense of bitterness in him, for poor people were cruelly exploited by a ruthless agricultural system. Steinbeck was unsympathetic to American materialism where all sense of real dignity and unshakable human values were practically non-existence. He protested the values of materialism which had affected the ruling government which did not care about the real condition of poor farmers,

“I ain't got a hell of a lot of respect for 'em now,” said Muley. “On'y kind a govern'ment we got that leans on us fellas is the 'safe margin a profit.' There's one thing that got me stumped, an' that's Willy Feeley-drivin' that cat', an' gonna be a straw boss on lan' his own folks used to farm. That worries me. I can see how a fella might come from some other place an' not know no better, but Willy belongs. (Steinbeck, 1958, p.55)

Steinbeck saw that the end of the tenant farmers system was not only caused by those government programs. Together with the era of effectiveness, Capitalism had successfully pushed the development of mechanization in many sides of industries. The mechanization, in one side, became a significant factor on the effectiveness of productivity. However, it was also a disaster for unskilled human labor. Tenant farmers were victims of that mechanization of modern agriculture.

And at last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won't work anymore. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take the entire crop. We have to do it. We don't like to do it. But the monster's sick. Something's happened to the monster. (Steinbeck, 1958, p. 14)

THE CRISIS OF MORALITY

The development of capitalism in America was also viewed by Steinbeck as the rise of moral decadency. It was indicated by the rise of amorality among part of the American social class. These values grew with the impact of capitalism, which endorsed people to pursue material success. The impacts are implicitly explored by Steinbeck (1958) are as follows,

Many people believe that greed is the prominent source of many economic disasters. When the Dalai Lama was asked “what is the real cause of this short of economic crisis?” He answered “Too much speculation and ultimately greed”

Above statement confirmed that moral authority of certain societies has a significant role in determining economic development (Singh, 2008). According to Suranovic (2010), some believed that greed fuels economy. Capitalism runs on the principle that everyone is motivated by a healthy dose of economic self-interest. Therefore, the buyer looks for the best bargain on a commodity, the farmer looks to get the highest price for his crops, however the officer looks to earn the biggest wages.

Steinbeck portrayed part of the world in California that gradually influenced by

capitalism. He told the story of Greedy American immigrants that stole California land from Mexican. This episode was recorded in following plot,

“Once California belonged to Mexico and its land to Mexicans; and a horde of tattered feverish Americans poured in. And such was their hunger for land that they took the land—stole Sutter’s land, Guerrero’s land, took the grants and broke them up and growled and quarreled over them, those frantic hungry men; and they guarded with guns the land they had stolen...”
“The Mexicans were weak and fed. They could not resist, because they wanted nothing in the world as ferociously as the Americans wanted land...” (Steinbeck, 1958, p. 231)

Here, Steinbeck tried to describe the greed of capitalism and the consequence that was internalized in part of American community. They used their power to drive out the weak Mexican people from their independent land.

Steinbeck identified the growth of selfishness and egoism among the owners or rich people exclusively getting their own profit. However, the Okies (migrants) were also previously living in an individualistic social system when they were still living in their homeland. It described that the capitalist system had radically affected American people to live selfishly. Until the company owner drove them away from the land, they changed the relation to a different quality.

Steinbeck described that egoism system in the early chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*. An egoistic rule is fingered on the truck driver. The system forbids the drivers from

giving a lift to any strangers. It is said through the dialogue:

The hitch-hiker stood up and looked across through the windows. "Could ya give me a lift, mister?"

The driver looked quickly back at the restaurant for a second. "Didn' you see the No Riders sticker on the win'shield?"

"Sure-I seen it. But sometimes a guy'll be a good guy even if some rich bastard makes him carry a sticker." (Steinbeck, 1958, .7)

As the capitalist society, Steinbeck is aware how individualistic and egoistic characters have absorbed into the American social consciousness. The quote was likely to say that individualistic character does not only occur in human cultural interaction, but it is also manifested into a formal system. Capitalism endorsed every individual to totally pursue own their profit rather than social altruism.

Steinbeck described the morality of capitalism as the corruptive power that manipulates migrant laborers to be slaves. This part was described through the adventure of Joad's search for work. He found that landowners took advantage to get cheap workers by spreading large number of handbills so that many workers came to California. There were huge number of people compete for job even the landowners offer them by lower and lower wages,

And this was good, for wages went down and prices stayed up. The great owners were glad and they sent out more handbills to bring more people in. And wages went down and prices stayed up. And

pretty soon now we'll have serfs again. (Steinbeck, 1958, p. 283)

The above quote tells us about the deceptive propaganda done by landowners in the West. They take benefit by deceptive handbills calling the dispossessed to go massively to California, where they would find plenty of jobs (Nyrubugara, 2002). This part describes the morality of capitalism in *The Grapes of Wrath* as a disgusting system, which exploited manpower by pounding only a couple of dollars a day for workers to live on.

Steinbeck criticized the trend of consumerism among American people that led to the economic depression. He illustrated how Americans pursue consumer goods however they did not need them,

"I didn' hardly see 'em. Funny thing. I wanta buy stuff. Stuff I don't need. Like to git one a them safety razors. Thought I'd like to have some a them gloves over there. Awful cheap." (Steinbeck, 1958, p. 411)

The above quote illustrates people in consumerist societies who live by the influence of advertisements, and often methodically buy things they do not need, and in most cases, cannot afford. This, in turn, leads to greater economic disparity, and despite having the most or latest products, consumerists have a feeling of unfulfillment due to spending a lot of money yet having nothing of personal importance.

What Steinbeck wrote above also implies his views about the impact of American capitalism on the expansion of consumerism. Hence, Steinbeck seems to say that consumerism is one of capitalisms

effects on the society. That view is reasonable since capitalist's solution to the economic downturn is to increase the circulation of capital. In other words, increase social consumerism. Thus, capitalism is a system of economy driven by consumer spending.

Dehumanization

Capitalism belonged to the higher class and undermined the role of the lower class. They did not pay attention to the basic rights of the poor's life as human beings. Steinbeck described the process of dehumanization growth significantly among the relation between higher and lower class society. Steinbeck depicted this economic calamity in *The Grapes of Wrath* as the result of capitalism failure. The author advocated the most suffered victim of the unfair system of economy, the tenant farmers, who were drove out from their own lands,

The tenant men looked up alarmed. But what'll happen to us? How'll we eat? You'll have to get off the land. The plows'll go through the dooryard. (Steinbeck, 1958, p. 33)

After experiencing the dust bowl disaster that destroyed their crops, the poor tenant farmers were confused about how to survive with those damaged lands. Not only that, afterwards the farmers had to find officers inspecting their lands on behalf of the banks. The farmers had to face the end of the tenancy system since it was no longer profitable for the banks. There was nothing they could do but left their lands.

Hence, Steinbeck vulgarly attacked the banks and banking system of America, and blamed them for many of the causes of the economic poverty of the time. For this

reason, Steinbeck saw banks and its system as a monster, which endlessly pursued its own profit. On other hand, the author also blamed the landowners who oppressed the poor farmer during the hard life as migrant labor in California.

Steinbeck described the marginalization in various situations. However, he was particularly concerned with law, economic and political marginality. In many chapters, Steinbeck described marginalization in the form of police oppression, which intimidated and discriminated against the poor migrants or Okies.

The Poor migrants were discriminated against police and media as non-citizens who were assured by the human rights and laws. Hence, they always found some threat and intimidation from local citizens and even security institutions, like the police. Steinbeck (1958) distinctly told:

"I was scairt," she said. "They was a policeman here. He says we can't stay here...."

She hesitated a long time. "Tom, this here policeman—he called us— Okies. He says, 'We don' want you goddamn Okies settlin' down.' "...

"Jus' says they don' want no damn Okies settlin' down. Says he's gonna run us in if we're here tomorra." (pp. 215-216)

Steinbeck characterized the police negatively. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the police are described as not assuring the Okies migrant security, as The Joad family experienced. Instead, they are sadistic, inhuman, arrogant, and trouble makers for migrants. Those characteristics are represented by the policemen's refusal to acknowledge the existence of migrant labor,

burning the camps, and breaking up the labor union. The following statement by Casy represented all the images of those police,

“I tol’ you. Cops cause more trouble than they stop. Look, Tom. Try an’ get the folks in there to come on out. They can do it in a couple days. Them peaches is ripe. Tell ’em.” (Steinbeck, 1958, p. 384)

Steinbeck was seriously concerned about the low salary accepted by the migrant labor as they were powerless to demand more. The author seemed to criticize what the owner did by spreading more and more propaganda, so that they will find workers more than needed.

The over plus of workers then made them free to cut labor’s wages. The dependent condition of the migrant laborers to survive led them to be exploited by the dominant group, land owners,

Three hundred thousand in California and more coming. And in California the roads full of frantic people running like ants to pull, to push, to lift, to work. For every manload to lift, five pairs of arms extended to lift it; for every stomachful of food available, five mouths open. (Steinbeck, 1958, p. 238)

A handbill was the effective means of capitalist landowners to bring more and more migrant workers to California. The huge current of migrants was profitable as they can both reduce the time it took to harvest and cut the wages. It was kind of sadistic exploitation motivated by the values of capitalism, more profit with less cost.

In this context, Steinbeck delivered his message that capitalism is inherently exploitative. Steinbeck proved that in capitalistic society, exploitation is used to increase profit and detriment the poor. The rich men of California tend to exploit their compatriots who are dependent on their salaries equally to the jobs.

CONCLUSION

Steinbeck has contributed to the American ethos through his own portrait of the migrant workers, the disposed and dirt farmers, and manual laborers. His pictures of crouch laborers, strikes, and depression became the proof of his protection of the values of morality and humanity. This was an unpopular ethos in the American capitalist society.

Steinbeck’s concern for the difficulties of the farmers in the rapid development of agribusiness, and his sympathy for union organizers became important themes in the novel, along with the resistance of the average person against big business. Steinbeck’s preference for continuous protest of the predatory system of economy was somehow influenced by the development of socialism in America.

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