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**SOCIAL REALISM IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH***

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**ABSTRACT**

The following paper is a study of the most dominant theme running through John Steinbeck's novels – 'Social Realism'. Social Realism was a movement of the 1930's in America where writers, painters and other literary figures made an attempt to present the true picture of the society. Through such works, the stratagems of rich land-owners and the capitalists were unravelled, while the farmers, migrants and poor people were sympathised with. Though Steinbeck's majority novels had the theme of social realism, but *The Grapes of Wrath* has been considered the best example. The novel won the Pulitzer Award in 1940 for its realistic depiction of the farmers' situation. The novel mimics life and offers social commentary too. However, Steinbeck's social realism crafts a point but doesn't allow a voyeuristic peek at the poor. This paper also tries to explain that the novel was not written with a purpose of political action, rather it is a sympathetic description exhorting us for greater social commitment and compassion as well as formulate policies of equality and justice.

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"Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material".

(William Dean Howells)

Broadly defined as 'the faithful representation of reality' or 'verisimilitude', realism is a literary technique practiced by many schools of writing. Although strictly speaking, realism is a technique, it also denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle class life. In arts and literature, realism may be defined as an attempt to represent life truthfully and also avoiding all such literary techniques which make life seem implausible, exotic, and extraordinary. The term originated in the nineteenth century, and was used to describe the works of Gustave Courbet and a group of painters who rejected idealization and focused on representing everyday real life. Realism was a reaction against Romanticism - a movement which had influenced European literature and arts since the late eighteenth century. It revolted against the 'exotic' subject matter and exaggerated emotionalism, and drama of the Romantic movement. According to William Harmon and Hugh Holman:

where romantics transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual or superficial to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists centre their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence. (Harmon and Holman 366)

The term 'Realism' however, has been used in different contexts signifying different meanings and concepts. There are the concepts of philosophical realism, moral realism, magic realism, scientific realism, depressive realism, legal realism, poetic realism and many more. All these 'realisms' share a common interest in presenting some aspect of life as it is lived. Majority of critics suggests that the term should only be used with a prefix attached. Samantha Lay asserts that the essential reason for using a prefix before the word 'realism' is that –

an important feature of all realisms is how they are produced at specific historical points. The addition of a prefix, such as social-, neo-, documentary-, poetic-, specifies the 'what' and, crucially, 'when' of that movement or moment. What is regarded as 'real', by whom, and how it is represented is unstable, dynamic, and ever-changing, precisely because realism is irrevocably tied to the specifics of time and place, or 'moment'. (Lay 6)

Thus, American Realism was an early twentieth century idea, in all fields of arts, that showed reflections of the time period through different types of work. Instead of looking back to antiquities for guidance artists, writers, and musicians were concerned with recording the experiences of the labour class, as well as the true reality of the early twentieth century in America. Social Realism was a sub-genre of this movement.

Social Realism was an artistic movement in the U.S, during the 1930s, that expressed itself in various fields of visual and other realistic arts. It depicted the social, racial, and economic injustices through the pictures of life's struggles. The movement also involved paintings where the scenes usually conveyed a message of political and social protest with a tint of satire in them. Examples of social novels are Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), John Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath* (1939), and Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* (1979). A Marxist version of the social novel, representing the hardships suffered by the oppressed and downtrodden working class, and usually written with a purpose of inciting the reader to radical political action, is called the 'Proletarian novel'. A Proletarian novel comes under the theory of Socialist Realism. Thus social realism shouldn't be confused with socialist realism.

There had been a number of writers who, at times, had been classified under this category of novel-writing, starting from Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, William Dean Howells, and Henry James in England and America; Stendhal, George Sand, Balzac and Flaubert in France; and Turgenev and Tolstoy in Russia. But none of them made this genre their penchant. It was John Steinbeck from America who, during his career, identified this genre as his niche.

John Steinbeck was a versatile writer. He has been described as a social protest writer, a realist, a journalist, and a playwright. There are many strong themes running through his works. The most notable are the strength of the family, the effect of environment on man, the dehumanizing effects of capitalism on the labour class, and social protests. He also experimented with many different writing styles and points of views. Steinbeck worked within the literary tradition of realism and expressed undistorted pictures of life's struggles as well as the inequalities and exploitation that characterised American Industrialization. His work contributed to some extent, to the growing progressive political movements which aimed at eradicating social problems including the oppression of women, prejudice against immigrants, discrimination against racial minorities, unsafe housing conditions and exploitative labour practices.

Almost all of Steinbeck's novels propagate the idea of social realism, but the best epitome, as considered by a majority of critics, is his Pulitzer award winning novel *The Grapes Of Wrath* (1939). This novel was published in the middle of the industrial revolution. In this period, poor farmers were marginalized and dispossessed of their lands. This fact motivates him to use a direct and truthful language in order to condemn those wrong-doings done to the poor helpless farmers by rich land-owners.

*The Grapes Of Wrath* starts with a depiction of Dust Bowl, the event which causes all that happens in the rest of the book. It then introduces Tom Joad, the main protagonist of the novel. The story

revolves around Tom Joad and his family's traumatic experience. The novel begins at a time when Tom had recently been paroled from prison, where he was serving a term for the charge of a murder. While returning to his family's home, he is joined by the retired preacher, Jim Casy. When they reach Tom's home, they are surprised to find the house abandoned and in a state of collapse. They, eventually, come to know that the family has shifted to Tom's uncle's home, and that they are planning to leave for California. It turns out that the family suffered huge loss due to the Dust Bowl and drought. As a result, they could not pay back the money that they had borrowed from the Bank, and the Bank foreclosed their farm which was the chief source of income for the Joad family. They had decided to shift to California because they were lured by the advertisements, in the newspapers, of ample work and reasonable salaries for labourers. However, on arriving at the 'promised land' they were completely shattered. They realised that these advertisements were actually the ploys of rich land-owners and capitalists for attracting huge amount of labouring-hands than were actually required. This way they could easily get cheap labour and exploit these 'needy ones'. Gradually the family's condition gets deteriorated and one by one the family members start leaving the group. Though Rosasharn, Tom's sister, was pregnant her husband abandons her. On the other hand, Jim Casy gets arrested by police and is separated from the family. For some time, the remaining members of the Joad family live at a government camp, but they are forced to leave the camp due to lack of any work. Finally, when they find the work of picking fruits, they realise that, unknowingly, they were involved in breaking a strike that was organised by Jim Casy. Eventually the strike turns violent and unfortunately Jim Casy gets killed. In an outrage, Tom again kills someone to avenge Casy's death. As a result, the family had to make an emergency escape in order to hide their fugitive son. The zenith of their sufferings is reached when Rosasharn gives birth to a stillborn baby. The novel ends with Rosasharn breast-feeding an old and starving man who is so emaciated that milk is the only thing that he could digest.

The novel is crudely realistic. Through the journey of the Joads, we come to see the labyrinths of capitalism characterised by its uncontrolled poverty, and its inhuman greed. The men from the Bank or the Companies that give loans, sit in their closed A.C cars and try to explain to the helpless farmers that a tractor does more work than a whole family of men, women and children put together; that their lands are to be mechanically ploughed under; that their hand-built houses are to be razed to the ground. The novel becomes a portrait of wounded characters: the despairing Muley Graves; the strange Noah and the obsessed Uncle John, a one eyed man self pitying his state; the typical Mae serving in a Highway 66 cafe; and the hell-bent vigilantes and deputies.

Social Realism becomes the lens through which Steinbeck's novel views the inequalities and sufferings in the world. He had a reporter's eye too. In telling his stories he wanted to let his audience know how things really were. Like Dickens, he aimed to tell society's hidden ugly truths. *The Grapes of Wrath* depicted a reality that no one wanted to face, in stunning detail:

The works of the roots of the vines, of the trees, must be destroyed to keep up the price, and this is the saddest, bitterest thing of all. Carloads of orange dumped on the ground. The people came for miles to take the fruit but this could not be.... And men with hoses squirt kerosene on the oranges...a million people hungry, needing the fruit-and kerosene sprayed over the golden mountains.

And the smell of rot fills the country. (Steinbeck 364)

The novel is so honest and powerful in depicting the conditions of the farmers that it was banned in two states, Oklahoma and California.

In the novel, Steinbeck implemented a contrapuntal structure, in which the chapters of exposition and background relevant to the migrants as a group (Chapters 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29) are arranged alternately with the long narrative chapters of the Joad family's dramatic journey to California (Chapters 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30). Just as in *Moby Dick* Melville created intensity and prolonged suspense by alternating between the temporal chapters of Ahab's driven quest for the white whale and Ishmael's numerous chapters on cetology, so Steinbeck structured his novel by juxtaposition. In fact his intercalary chapters ("pace changers", Steinbeck called them) were intentionally designed to "hit the reader below the belt." (Steinbeck revealed to Columbia undergraduate Herbert Sturz in 1953). Some of the

intercalary chapters do an amazing job of painting the harsh reality of life during the Depression. In chapter 19, for instance, Steinbeck figures out the pathetic situation of the migrants with a pictorial quality:

They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do- to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut- anything, any burden to bear, for food. (Steinbeck 244)

Despite Steinbeck's doubts regarding the response towards the novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* turned out to be not only a 'fine' book, but the greatest of his seventeen novels. With its release in April, 1939, the novel, swept the country, bringing on a storm of reviews. In his writing on Steinbeck's career, Peter Lisca recalled the impact of the book's publication that the novel was publicly banned and burned by citizens, but above all, it was read.

However the response towards the novel was not completely positive. There arose a situation of 'for' and 'against' for the novel. The novel had been attacked by academic scholars as sentimental, unconvincing, and inartistic; while time and again banned by school boards and libraries for its rebellious theme and frank language. It was also denounced by right-wing ministers, corporate farmers, and politicians as communist, immoral, degrading, warped, and untruthful. Oklahoma Congressman Lyle Boren, one of the staunch opponents of the novel, called it "a lie, a black, infernal creation of twisted, distorted mind" (qtd. in Steinbeck xxxvii). A Jesuit priest, Arthur D. Spearman, called it "an embodiment of the Marxist Soviet propaganda" (qtd. in Steinbeck xxxvii).

But calling the novel a "Marxist Soviet propaganda" was not fair, because Steinbeck himself reacted to Stalinist communism the same way he did to social snobbery – with vigour. His opposition to the Soviet system and his affection for the Russian people are both evident in *A Russian Journal* (the result of his collaboration with the photographer Robert Capa following their tour of the USSR in 1947).

While analysing the novel from socially realistic point of view one major drawback that comes to the forefront is the observation put forward by Carey McWilliams. According to him, Steinbeck while portraying the realistic image of contemporary time, ignored the problems of non white migrant workers – Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, and Mexicans – who made up a significant percentage of California's agricultural labour force. But beyond all these assets and liabilities the impact of the novel may be summed up in a saying that goes as: 'you may love it; you may hate it; but you can't ignore it'.

It may be concluded that Steinbeck records the entirety of the time and place that took in *The Grapes of Wrath*, emphasising the social realism of the entire gamut of human nature. Readers meet every single person whether they are the ones who take advantage of those who have nothing (car salesmen); whether those who take advantage of the people's desperation (California land-owners and farmers); whether the ones having nothing but offering everything (the many farmers); whether people living on hope; or whether they are the ones who do whatever they must do to survive. *The Grapes of Wrath* shows the entirety of human nature and is the true essence of realism.

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