

Exploring the Dreadful Era of Great Depression in John Steinbeck's Novel *The Grapes of Wrath*

Author Name - Twinkle Saha

Educational qualification - M.A in English, NET

Designation - student

Country - India

State - Assam

District - Golaghat

Town - Sarupathar

Post Office - Sarupathar

Pin - 785601

Abstract

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* published in 1939 is a landmark American realist novel, which is an account of the horrendous impact of the Great Depression in American history. The Great Depression was a severe economic downturn in U.S. history spanning from 1929 to 1939 which was characterized by high rates of unemployment and poverty, drastic reductions in industrial production and international trade, and widespread bank and business failures. Thus set during this era of 1930s *The Grapes of Wrath* specifically highlights the dual crisis of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, which transform the ever cherished, celebrated and prosperous land - U.S., to a barren, despairing and dejected land. Thus this paper aims to study the impact of the Great Depression on the lives of the common people, it also aims to highlight the corrupt system of the capitalist society which runs by the laws of materialism, exploitation, injustice and domination. Detailing the struggles of the Joad family of Oklahoma farmers who were forced to migrate to California, the novel highlights themes of injustice, resilience and economic hardship as the migrants face exploitation, poverty, starvation and even death, thus providing a critique of capitalism. This paper further aims to portray the American Dream as a futile, broken promise, transforming the pursuit of prosperity and happiness into a desperate struggle for mere survival. Thus through the Joad family's arduous journey it highlights how economic inequality, corporate greed and displacement during the Great Depression turn the idealized American dream into a dehumanizing nightmare.

Keywords - *The Grapes of Wrath*, Great Depression, Dust Bowl, American Dream, migration.

Introduction

The Great Depression marked the worst and most widespread recession in modern history. This catastrophic economic crisis has reverberated across the globe, with far-reaching consequences for the United States in particular. GDP shrank by nearly a third between 1930 and 1933, and unemployment climbed to 25 percent, while farmers were 40 percent. Thus one of the most immediate effects of the Great Depression was widespread unemployment. However another devastating impact of the Great Depression was in the agriculture sector. The agricultural regions of the United States, especially the Midwest and South, faced extremely difficult situations. Excess agricultural production and declining market demand led to a sharp drop in the price of agricultural products, a sharp drop in farmers' incomes, and many people were unable to pay loans and taxes, eventually losing their land. The condition of the farmers became more deplorable by the sandstorms which exacerbated their plight. Prolonged droughts and strong storms blew the fertile soil away, causing large-scale desertification

of the land and with destruction of the crops, many farmlands turned into ‘dead land’. These hardships forced millions of farmers to migrate to western states like California in search of work, and these so-called ‘western immigrants’ often faced difficult living conditions characterized by poverty, food deprivation, lack of adequate shelter, financial stress, and limited access to basic necessities of survival.

Thus *The Grapes of Wrath* plays a pivotal role in delineating the real life situation of America amidst the hazardous storm of Great Depression. The novel also serves as a critique of the inhumanity of predatory capitalism by portraying its systemic force that prioritizes profit over human life, effectively turning individuals into both victims and unwilling participants in cruelty. The Joad family suffers profound hardships caused by the economic crises and Dust Bowl facing extreme exploitation, including the loss of their Oklahoma farm, starvation, the deaths of grandparents, breakdown of the family structure, inhumane living conditions in migration camps and severe discrimination as ‘Okies’ in California. On top of that the inhumane working conditions with job scarce, and landowners exploiting migrant workers using intimidation and keeping wages low and refusing to pay fair rates, survival became a challenge for them. Thus the perilous journey of the Joads gives a scenic representation of the devastation created by the Great Depression and the sea of plight it brought about into the lives of the common people. Here the Joad family is representative of all the poor working class and farmers of U.S.

Smashing the promises of equality, happiness and opportunities, to widening the disparity between rich and poor, the very essence of the American dream is also being challenged in the novel. Thus the selection of this topic and consideration of the novel makes this study a profound one in the field of American history. This study aims to draw every pros and cons related to the crisis, its causes, its aftermath and its effect on the global economy, as well as the changes it brought about into the U.S. economy and its contribution in the formation of a new and altogether strong system which rises up to be the present day American society.

Objectives

- i) The aim of this paper is to identify the causes which lead to the termination of the U.S. economy in the selected novel.
- ii) To study the devastating consequences of migration in the time of economic crises.
- iii) Make an in depth study of the social, moral and psychological costs of living in a society or culture deeply rooted in capitalism and materialism.
- iv) To explore the reality behind the idealized notion of the American Dream - of equality, prosperity and upward mobility.
- v) Make an in depth study of the suffering of the common man during the Great Depression with reference to the Joad family’s hardships.

Literature Review

Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* offers a compelling, multifaceted portrayal of life during the Great Depression, shedding light on the harsh realities faced by displaced farmers grappling with both economic and environmental turmoil. Over the years, scholars have approached the novel from a variety of angles. Some have delved into critiques of the American Dream and the stark social inequalities of the time, while others have explored its themes through the lenses of ecocriticism and Marxism. Thus the review of literature below

considers major scholarly contributions that discuss how Steinbeck depicts the Great Depression in *The Grapes Of Wrath* highlighting its different dimensions.

Siwei Zhang & Jingdong Zhong in their article of 2025 talks about the societal system of American society in the time of the Great Depression and criticizes its unjust capitalist system which is dominated by the exploitation of the working class in the hands of the ruling elite class. As it mentions -

The novel overflows with social upheaval, revealing the widening gulf between the wealthy elite and the poor working class. By portraying these social tensions, Steinbeck not only reveals the gap between rich and poor, but also offers a sharp critique of the capitalist system that perpetuates this injustice. (Siwei Zhang & Jingdong Zhong, 4450)

Karshiyeva Lobar Mansur kizi in his article of 2025 talks about how silencing the poor has been used as the most powerful weapon by the rulers. Thus when characters like Jim Casey and Tom Joad tried to raise their voice in various situations their voices were forcefully dismissed. As it mentions -

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, having a voice—the ability to speak out, organize, question injustice, and express shared suffering—is presented as a vital form of power, especially for the poor and oppressed. Steinbeck shows that those in power often try to silence the powerless, because when the marginalized speak together, they become dangerous to the status quo. (Karshiyeva Lobar Mansur kizi, 19)

Dr. T. Vasantha Kumari & P.S. Poornima, in their article of 2017 talks about the profit seeking greedy and selfish employers of California whose greediness rose as they had more workers than they needed. So they gave them very low wages with which they could only survive and could not attain any profit. As the article mentions -

The migrants were oppressed and suppressed by the land owners. They were also kept under surveillance so that no one could escape from their miserable situation. The owners of the farm were inhumane. They rob both the wealth of the land and strength of the workers. (Dr. T. Vasantha Kumari & P.S. Poornima, 4)

Nasalevych, T. V., & Pchela Yu. V., in their article of 2019 talks about the power of unity portraying the Joad family's collective struggle against exploitation. It studies family as a crucial mechanism for survival and emotional strength, evolving from a tight-knit, insular nuclear unit into a broader, compassionate community. As it mentions -

It is indisputable that the community of people united by a common dream to earn decent living is a source of strength and resilience. Being part of a community makes one voice their concerns and demand their rights being respected, which is the reason why authorities fear migrant camps and use every excuse to destroy them. (Nasalevych, T. V., & Pchela Yu. V., 107)

James Truslow Adams in his publication - *The Epic of America* (1932), provided the definition of American Dream as:

That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. (Adams, 404)

This book talks about the true ideal of the American Dream - its promises of equality, prosperity, boundless opportunities, upward mobility and liberty to live a life as one dreams of, but the present novel challenges these idealized notions by the stark representation of the deplorable state of the Joad family.

Thus reviewing the existing literary works it can be inferred that Steinbeck's description of the injustices and exploitation continues to resonate, and the novel is essential text for understanding both historical and contemporary issues of inequality, lack of opportunity and acceptance. Thus this theme of the capitalist system and economic disparity can further be studied in the context of the present society.

Methodology

This research applies analytical method as well as close reading of both the primary and secondary sources. It applies Marxist Literary Theory to study the class struggle, economic structure and relationship between money and power. It also takes account of the Psychoanalytic Theory to study the impact of materialism on one's psyche. Furthermore the research uses thematic analysis to determine recurring themes associated with the Great Depression, such as economic disparity and exploitation, displacement and alienation etc. For a deeper understanding of Steinbeck's criticism, the study adopts historical and socio-economic contextualization by investigating how the Jazz Age of the roaring twenties and Great Depression influenced American society. The research also takes under consideration most recent peer-reviewed articles, research papers and scholarly books that critically analyzed the era of Great Depression from various angles. This approach ensures that the study is part of the prevailing academic discourse, yet it also adds on new insights into the existing field.

Analysis

In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck combines powerful storytelling with social criticism to paint a poignant picture of economic injustice, human resilience, and the struggle for dignity. Set in the background of the Great Depression when the stock market of U.S crashed and the commercial banking system collapsed completely, the novel critiques the evilness of the capitalist system that prioritises profit over human life making the poor working class its worst victim.

However, along with the field of industry, the agricultural sector was also hit hard by the crisis which made the condition of the poor farmers worse and their plight was even extended by the Dust Bowl. A severe drought led to massive agricultural failure in the southwest part of America mainly in Oklahoma and California. Because of the absence of rain, farmers who cultivated crops in such areas were greatly affected and the landowners were unable to recover their investment on crops, so they forced the farmers and their families to leave their land and travel from places to places in search of work and shelter. Because the bank or the landowners only wanted to make profit at any cost even at the expense of one's life. As Steinbeck himself mentions the banks as 'monster'.

The bank--the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die. No, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can't stay one size. (Steinbeck, 31)

Furthermore the inhumanity of the landowners can also be traced by their very attempt to replace the tenants with a single machine 'tractor' so that they could save their money. Humanity in them is long dead and they could not see that the tenants' life depends on that little wages that they offer. Thus, not only drought and poverty could be blamed as the reason for the people's migration to the other land, but also the inhumanity of the elite class of the society who forced them to leave their land. Steinbeck again describes the modern machines as monsters in the following line.

The tractors came over the roads and into the fields . . . Snubnosed monsters, raising the dust The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; glove, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was

a part of the monster, a robot in the seat. He could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth. (Steinbeck, 24)

As they are not left with any other hope for survival, the Joads decide to move westward to the promising land of California. With hope for better life, better work opportunity, a house of their own where they can live peacefully and happily, they start their journey towards their ideal American Dream of new livelihood in California. However the journey instead turned out to be a dehumanising nightmare for the family, with the death of the grand parents of the family - Grandma and Grandpa Joad, Rose of Sharon's still born baby to the most unjust death of Jim Casy in the hands of the Californian authority and the utmost suffering of the rest of the members residing in inhumane conditions within the migrant camps, running from place to place in search of work and being exploited by the owners, doing extreme levels of hard work yet receiving very low wages, with many members breaking the familial structure by walking off on their own way for survival, thus the journey that started with hope of prosperity, happiness and a better life ended with desperate struggle for mere survival.

However in exploiting these helpless migrants, the initial deception was the contractors' most potent weapon. They would distribute handbills and spread rumors of abundant jobs, intentionally overstating the demand for labor. This created an artificial glut of workers, allowing the contractors to dictate abysmally low wages. The migrants would arrive in California only to find thousands of other families vying for the same meager opportunities. Once the migrants were ensnared, the contractors' tactics escalated in brutality. They often acted as gatekeepers to work, demanding exorbitant 'fees' or 'commissions' for simply connecting workers with jobs. The wages offered are as low that it becomes less for arranging even the basic necessity of survival like food or medicine thus the dream of owning one's own house is a out of reach kind of dream, which has zero possibility of being fulfilled. Moreover this system created a vicious cycle: the less money the migrants earned, the more dependent they became on the contractors for survival, thereby deepening their exploitation. Steinbeck depicts scenes where able-bodied men would literally fight over a few cents an hour, highlighting the desperate competition fostered by the contractors. This oversupply also allowed the contractors to disregard basic human dignity; they could easily dismiss workers who complained or demanded fair treatment, knowing that a long line of hungry replacements awaited.

The extent of atrocity that farmers endure is so hard that the solution was only to adapt to the situation. Thus, it is clear that nobody was able to do anything against this state of things, against the system, against the owners, as it is well illustrated in this paragraph:

It's not me. There is nothing I can do. I'll lose my job if I don't do it. And look - suppose you kill me? They'll just hang you, but long before you're hung, there'll be another guy on the tractor, and he'll bump the house down. You're not killing the right guy.» (Steinbeck, 37)

This shows the level of helplessness of the working class and the level of power, exploitation and dominance the ruling elite class had in their hand. In other words, one can notice that farmers have nothing to do except submitting to the exploiters adjusting to the changing environment in order to survive as Steinbeck suggests otherwise their life will be in jeopardy.

Furthermore, the contractors often colluded with landowners, forming a powerful, unholy alliance that prioritized profit over human welfare. This collusion ensured that any attempts by the migrants to organize or demand better conditions were swiftly crushed, silencing them to make sure they don't get the courage to speak

and always remain submissive. The threat of blacklisting, physical intimidation, and even violence hung over the heads of those who dared to challenge the established order. Steinbeck's portrayal of law enforcement, often in the pockets of these powerful interests, further underscores the helplessness of the migrants in the face of such pervasive corruption.

Another kind of challenge that the migrants had to face was the hatred from their dream land of California, although they had done no wrong to anyone. As Steinbeck mentions -

They were hungry, and they were fierce. And they had hoped to find a home, and they found only hatred. Okies - the owners hated them.....And in the towns the storekeepers hated them because they had no money to spend.....The town men, little bankers, hated Okies because there was nothing to gain from them. They had nothing. And the labouring people hated Okies because a hungry man must work, and if he must work, if he has to work, the wage payer automatically gives him less for his work; and then no one can get more. (Steinbeck, 214)

However one of the most pathetic yet unjust treatment meted towards the migrants of the novel is Jim Casey's cruel murder. which shows how strongly, cruelly and horrendously the voices of the marginalized sections were suppressed, who ever tried to raise their voice against the system, against the injustices meted towards them. As Casey was organizing striking peach pickers to improve their dire conditions when vigilantes, hired by landowners, find him. Thus his head was immediately crushed by a pickaxe leading to his spotdeath. However it had strongest effect on Tom Joad who witnesses the killing, he retaliates by killing the police officer, and eventually leaves his family to fulfill Casey's role in fighting for the rights of the poor. Casey's sacrifice represents the culmination of the novel's themes of turning the "I" into "We," highlighting his transition from a wandering preacher to a radical labor organizer.

Thus demonstrating the extreme cruelty inflicted upon the poor by the elite, Steinbeck all along *The Grapes of Wrath* draws a simple line through the American people, one that divides the rich from the poor and identifies this division as the primary source of wickedness and pain in America as well as in the world. The purpose of creating protective associations is also a way for rich owners to unite their force and discuss to the adequate policy to break migrant farmers' associations. Thus, the freedom of organization is scorned. And as we know, the liberty to associate is something fundamental for workers. But, when this right is forbidden, one can say that human rights are disrespected and farmers as victim are almost reduced to slave.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be inferred that Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath* is indeed a landmark in American history giving the real life picture of the exploitation and plight endured by the poor working class during the time of Great Depression and the inhumanity of the materialist culture where profit is valued more than human life. It portrays exploitation, and corruption in every institution related to the capitalist society - the banks, the industries, the farmlands, even the bureaucracy every institution. Thus through the mirror image of history, we can more clearly reflect on the hidden dangers of the gap between the rich and the poor, social inequality, and economic crisis that still exist in contemporary society. The realities of poverty and injustice, money and power have always crept up in some corners, and despite changes in the global economic situation and progress in economic growth in many countries, unequal distribution of wealth, the entrenchment of social stratification and indifference to the vulnerable continue to plague modern societies. Thus throughout the novel, Steinbeck questions whether justice can truly exist in a system dominated by wealth and power.

References

- Adams, James Translaw. *The Epic of America*. Digital Library of India Item. <https://share.google/PWo54SLE2uRICJ7Zc>
- Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream*. Oxford University Press. 2003.
- Kumari, T. Vasantha & P. S. Poornima. "An Ecohumanistic Perception Of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath*". Pune Research An International Research in English, Vol- 3, issue 4, 2017, PP 1-5 <https://share.google/NtBWxtOVqSrij6RYDY>
- Kizi, Karshiyeva Lobar Mansur. "Literary Analysis Of John Syeinbeck's Novel *The Grapes Of Wrath*". *Galaxy International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, Vol 13, issue 9, 2025, PP 18-21. <https://share.google/ulCFpXv75NxZ0uG1A>
- Manikumar, Y. "American Dream A Mirage In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath*". *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, Vol 4, issue 3, 2016, PP 369-372 <https://share.google/ETpuoLKJrFmAVsMwJ>
- Mishra, Yash Raj. "Historical Context and Enduring Legacy of *The Grapes of Wrath* written by John Steinbeck". *International Journal of Education and Science Research Review*, Vol 12, issue 1, 2025, PP 149-154 <https://share.google/euUD1ZwVijLJFG0yK>
- Nasalevych, Tamara, & Pchela Yu. V. "Themes Creating The Concept Of American Dream In The Novel *The Grapes Of Wrath* By John Steinbeck. *International Humanitarian University Herald Philology*, Vol 39, issue 1, 2019, PP105-108 <https://share.google/APc0qdo4m2mFUjlyh>
- Pugh, Scott. "Horrorifying Conclusions: Making Sense of Endings in Steinbeck's Fiction." *Project Muse*, Vol 3, issue 1, 2006, PP 69-83 <https://share.google/c7KcGpFqFxBssLMtg>
- Riggio, Clara R. Defining the American Dream: A Generational Comparison. *Modern Psychological Studies*, Vol 27, issue 1, 2021, PP 1-20 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368472048_Defining_the_American_Dream_A_Generational_Comparison
- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes Of Wrath*. Digital Library of India Item. <https://share.google/Z4Lp1ZT57NiMFufXK>
- Zhang Siwei & Jingdong Zhong. "A Study on The Pictures of The Great Depression in *The Grapes of Wrath*". *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, Vol 08, Issue 06, 2025, PP 4450-4457 <https://share.google/8fGRtsFGzq5WscP8T>

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.