

Humiliation in *The Grapes of Wrath*

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Abstract:

The present research paper briefs John Steinbeck and his works. It summarizes *The Grapes of Wrath*. It details the concept 'humiliation'. It overviews humiliation in the select novel. It ends with the conclusion that most of the part of the novel is occupied with humiliation.

Keywords: The Grapes of Wrath, Humiliation, Literature, Fiction, Novel

JOHN STEINBECK AND HIS WORKS

John Steinbeck, a prolific writer was born in California in 1902 and died in 1968. He married Carol Henning in 1930. He won Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. He did varieties of jobs like care taker of an estate, fruit picker, chemist, surveyor, carpenter, newspaperman, etc. His change in profession reflected in his writing. He experienced the situation of laborers and expressed in most of his literary creations. All his creations are based on realistic study. His works are: Pastures of Heaven (1932), To a God Unknown (1933), Tortilla

Flat (1935), In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1937), The Long Valley (1939), The Grapes of Wrath (1939), The Sea of Cortez (1941), The Moon is Down (1942), Bombs Away (1942), Connery Row (1945), The Red Pony (1945), The Wayward Bus (1947), The Pearl (1947), Russian Journal (1948), The Long of the Sea of Cortez (1951), East of Eden (1952), Sweet Thursday (1954), Once There Was War (1958), The Winter of Our Discontent (1961), Travels with Charley (1962), etc.

SUMMARY OF *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

The Grapes of Wrath is a novel of compassion and wrath. The compassion is for poor people and wrath is for unjust economic system. It narrates depression, exploitation, starvation, etc., mingled in a prodigious trek of Joad family from Oklahoma to California. The entire novel can be divided into three parts. The part one consists of chapters from 01 to 11, which describe bad condition of share croppers in Oklahoma. Here in part one, Joads leave their house and land and join migrants. Part second consists of chapters from 12 to 18 which take place on highway 66 where in horrible experiences of the migrants particularly of the Joads have been described. Part three consists of chapters from 19 to 30 which describe that the California is not a place of justice and opportunity. It is not a promised land. The entire novel seems to be a story of humiliation.

THE CONCEPT 'HUMILIATION'

John Steinbeck depicts humiliation in his sociologically oriented novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Prior to study the select novel with reference to the select

topic, it needs to clarify the concept 'humiliation'.

Humiliation exists since the existence of the mankind on the planet Earth. It seems irrespective of the barriers like age, sex, region, culture, language, identity, etc. Humiliating someone or being humiliated is a part of it and one loses his / her dignity in it. The similar words for humiliation are as follows:

“Embarrassment, mortification, shame, indignity, ignominy, disgrace, dishonor, discomfiture, degradation, discredit, obloquy, opprobrium, loss of pride, loss of face, affront, insult, rebuff, snub, put-down, blow to one's pride, slap in the face, smack in the face, kick in the teeth, brush-off, disesteem, reprobation, vitiation, etc.”

(<https://www.google.co.in/search?scient=psyab&site=&source=hp&btnG=Search&q=humiliation,01.03.2019>)

Bullying, dehumanization, schadenfreude, self-abasement, social defeat, etc. are the alternative words for humiliation. Humiliation can be social, emotional, psychological, sexual, political, economical, etc. The causes of humiliation can be caste variation, religion variation, qualification difference, economical status (poor/rich), superstitions, illiteracy, gender difference, physical disability, ego, salary, border disputes, state disputes, conflicts, generation gap, govt. rules, childlessness, dowry, power, ownership, authority, rights, etc. The weariness, nervousness, frustration, disturbance, hopelessness, irrationalism, negative environment, absence of something, failure in forming meaningful relationships, absurdity, etc. can also be the causes of humiliation. It results in violence, crimes, deaths, quarrels, disputes, wars, bloodsheds, murders, suicides, rapes, dacoits, starvation, depression, exploitation, etc.

The definitions of it are as follows:

“Humiliation is the abasement of pride, which creates mortification or leads to a state of being humbled or reduced to lowliness or

submission.” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humiliation>, 01.03.2019)

“Humiliating - Liable to humiliate, degrade, shame or embarrass someone.”(<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/humiliating>, 01.03.2019)

“Humiliate - To injure the dignity and self-respect of.”
(<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/humiliate>, 01.03.2019)

Humiliation in *The Grapes of Wrath*

Humiliation has been depicted in John Steinbeck’s proletarian fiction *The Grapes of Wrath*. Oklahoma share croppers suffer from ruinous conditions. They are affected by the drought. The crops are died. The sun shines fiercely. There is no rainfall. The wind with dust blows fast and uproots weaker crops. The farmers witness ruining crops in the hot sun. This is the humiliation of Oklahoma share croppers by Nature.

The share croppers are humiliated because they do not own land. They are merely tenant farmers. They keep only share of crop and the remaining goes to pay taxes and the owners like banks and finance company. The land owners decide not keep tenants’ share, as it is a margin of profit for owners; they decide to make one big farm of all the small pieces of land; they decide to tractor out all families. It is a humiliation of share – croppers as their bread and butter, a source of livelihood was solely depended on the earning from these lands. They are fearful and nervous due to the government interference and higher taxes. Frustration and hunger are filled in their life.

The economic and legal factors force tenant farmers to leave traditional techniques of farming. They plea for some time but they are not given time. The tenant system comes to an end. They protest for not being tractored out but of

no use. They say:

“But its our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it’s no good, it’s still ours. That’s what makes it ours – being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it.”

(https://nisbah.com/summer_reading/grapes_of_wrath_john_steinbeck2.pdf: 01.03.2019, 23)

It is tenant’s great plight that:

“The tractors moved in and pushed the tenants out.” (Ibid: 161)

The huge tractors plough land and crushes houses. The drivers look like robot and merely work for money. Per day, many families have to leave their homes. They wander on roads but nobody thinks for it. These people are the victims of such forces, which is beyond their control. They are totally powerless and face humiliation. They are swept up just like turtle.

The banks are also responsible for the humiliation of the share – cropping Oakies. The banks earn profit and it has its own rules of working which override the people. Tenants borrow money from bank but now, the banks want their land. The banks prefer to machinise the agriculture and demolish the hopes of labour. The banks issue quit notice to the tenants. The bulldozers demolish the holdings and cabins. The evicted tenants are not allowed to linger on the scoured land. They are helpless refugees.

At the outset, from the land, they drive:

“One man, one family.” (Ibid: 101)

But later, they drive thousands of families. They claim:

“I lost my land.” (Ibid: 101)

Later turns to:

“We lost our land.” (Ibid: 101)

Is it not humiliation?

They sell their animals and farm equipment in low value. The things which they cannot carry, they pile it in the yard and burry with sadness because they had their memories with these objects. They are anxious to leave. They suffer a lot in travelling. They are humiliated by opportunist businessmen. While migrating, the poor migrants need means of transportation. Dealers are crooked and taking disadvantage of the bad situation of the poor migrants. They are greedy and making profit out of it. They take out good batteries from the cars before delivery and pour sawdust in exhaust system. They bargain and they know, the farmers are uneducated and they are badly in need of cars and it is easy to deal with the complaints of these poor migrants. The people, to whom they meet on the road to California, tell them to return back as the California border petrol does not allow them to enter in. The migrants think California is good for them but they are frustrated by witnessing reality.

California possesses fertile land, which quickens produce; grows fruits and supportive environment to increase yield. But the people have no money to purchase fruits and alcohol. The Californian employers start canning fruits but the men who create fruits, cannot create system by which fruits are eaten. They deliberately attract a pool of reserve labour by publicity and cut wages ruthlessly. They coat fruits with tar and then throw into the sea to show scarcity and increase the prices. They cheat, repress and humiliate migrants. Fruits are decayed; oranges are thrown on grounds; coffee is burnt; potatoes are thrown in rivers; and the smell of the slaughtered pigs infects people. There is no work available and the work, the people get, is of low value. The people are hungry and the crime goes beyond criticism. It is sorrowful that the land is rich and fruit creating but children die due to starvation and women deliver dead babies. The millions of people are jobless and homeless. Humiliation reaches the climax.

The families are defeated. They have lost everything. It is battle with starvation and economic depression. The people from Oklahoma are called Okie, which is term of insult.

“Okie use’ to mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you’re a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you’re scam. Don’t mean nothing itself, it’s the way they say it.” (Ibid: 139)

The migrants find, they are free as soon as they get money; only money speaks and no human misery. They find no home but only hatred. They are hated because of their dirty life style and as they are being competitors for local people’s jobs. The owner hate them as they swarm their property; the bankers hate them as they have nothing to contribute; the store keepers hate them as they have nothing to spend; and the laboring natives hate them as they reduce their wages. They find Californians are unreasonable. Ploughed but unused land is sin for these hungry people and the children. They have no opportunity to enter in school. Growing mechanization bring families on road.

On the road, the migrants move like ants for food. They are troubled by black listers, spies and agents. They prefer prayer instead of revolt. They have painful existence. They suffer from hunger not only for food but also for amusement. They look humbly for amusement on roads. They try their best to adjust in the current situation. Frustration, resentment and anger occupy their life. There is no sufficient work and due to the availability of many workers, the work does not last long. They do not afford to eat meat each night. They are unable to save money to survive in the time of no work and worry about their survival. Poor migrants are not only harassed by droughts in Oklahoma but also by the floods in California. The cars and tents of migrants remain in water. They get no relief fund. The natives harass the migrant tenants and make them dispossessed and homeless. The natives think that the migrants will organize

against them. Therefore, they are told of not having work for them. The natives mislead the people by wrong advertisements. Some think to be organized against this humiliation but the leaders are placed in jail. The associations are formed and money is spent on arms to extinguish the murmuring of revolt. They use pretense of laws and hooligans to sniff out the revolt leaders.

The farmer's association humiliate the residents, i.e., migrants, Okies, etc. of government camps. It forces to reduce hourly rate from 30 cents to 25 cents. They mandate pay cut. They do not like government camps because the deputies are not allowed to enter in. The people have their own laws and are not arrested without warrant. The authority plans to create disturbance in the Saturday night dance so that they can have an excuse to close the camps. They believe, such camps spoil migrants and if they stay at one place for long time, they will unite and ask for increase in wage. Is it not humiliation?

Houses and land, though are not alive or human beings, are humiliated. Once it was occupied with human beings, but now, looks almost vacant, occupied with tractors. It has no living energy and charm. It is abandoned land without food and houses are inhabited by bats, owls, weasels, cats and mice. It is totally desolated.

One of the representative families, i.e., Joad family suffer from the prolonged drought, which led to unemployment and became victim of the harassment of the soulless industrialization. They battle with extreme starvation and witness extreme economic depression of the thirties. They are exploited. Ma Joad is the mother of sorrows. The story and humiliation in it moves around her. She passes beyond pain and suffering. She finds herself in depression because she thinks, she will never see Tom again as he is in prison. She never tolerates her family to split up but sometimes she witnesses breaking up her family. First Granpa departs; the elder son, Noah, wanders away down the river; the son-in-

law, Connie, sulks away; and finally Tom, main support of the Joads, departs. She is emotionally humiliated when Noah decides his different path. She utters:

“Family’s fallin’ apart.”(Ibid: 146)

In the next part of the journey, Granma dies which disturbs Ma. She wishes proper burial to Granma. But the Joad family does not afford it. Granma’s last wish is not fulfilled and Ma is unable to do it due to the lack of money. Due to this, Ma Joad enters deep in agony. Is it not humiliation of both? When Tom is in hiding place, we find tears in the eyes of Ma Joad. She sees her children’s pangs as of her own. Her heart breaks due to the unexpected and rising blows. When Tom bids good-bye, her eyes are wet and footsteps are careless. She suffers a lot when one by one her family members pass away. Due to Ruthie’s disclosure of fact, Tom has to hide and Ma has to send him to go away. By this news, Pa depresses himself. Is it not humiliation of Tom, Ma and Pa.

Grampa dies in the journey. When Sairy Wilson allows him to sleep on mattress, he cries. Ma helps Grampa. Sairy and Casy think that it is a stroke. Casy knows, it is serious but Grampa says that he is sulking. He is unable to pray. He is serious and being suffocated. Casy opens his mouth. He prays for him but Grampa dies before his end of pray. The family members themselves bury Grampa because they have no money to pay for it. Grampa’s death is so poor and tragic. When the family members discuss among themselves about Grampa after his death, Casy says:

“Grampa didn’ die tonight. He died the minute you took ‘im off the place.”(Ibid: 98)

It is an affinity towards native land, but quitting it, provides pain which results in ending life and it is true in case of Grampa. The extreme fees make him to leave the land and force him to die. It is his humiliation.

When Tom reaches home, after four years of his custody, he finds house in bad condition, living animals like cats and rats. He listens from Muley Graves, distant neighbor that his family members left home due to the pressure of landowners like banks and finance companies; and his family members fought for their land. He hides himself when deputies arrive. He is not a free man and cannot show his natural instinct. The destruction of house affects him badly. Throughout the novel, he finds facing trouble. Is it not his humiliation?

Muley Graves is humiliated. He refuses to leave land though he is dispossessed. His family leaves to California but he does not. He gets nothing to eat. He kills squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, chickens, etc. He lives like ghost. He remembers his boyhood; he remembers the place where he met his first love; he remembers the room where his first son was born. Now, he peeps deep in agony as landowners destroyed it all. He hates landowners. Is it not a humiliation of this old man?

Connie loses hopes in the journey by witnessing the harshness of reality. He thinks, they should have been stayed at Oklahoma. Emotionally, he is humiliated.

One's madness causes humiliation to innocents. Mrs. Sandry is a crazy woman who frightens Rose of Sharon. She opines the camp people are sinners. She says:

“You're hell – burnin' sinners, all of you! I can see your black soul a – burnin'. I can see that innocent child in that there girl's belly a – burnin'” (Ibid: 219)

Rose of Sharon is afraid of her proclamation and worries about her unborn baby. Later, she gives birth to a dead baby. It is her humiliation, which is due to starvation and mental harassment. It is not only her humiliation but also the humiliation of her baby, which finds itself death wherein it has no sin.

The members of Joad family are tired. They have small amount of money. They are in need of work. The contractor and deputy offer them a work at Talure country but do not decide the wage. In the meantime, they recognize Floyd Knowles and force him to get in car. They threaten Tom and migrants that if they do not prefer to go to Talure, they will burn camp sites. Floyd Knowles tries to escape. The deputy fires and hits woman. Tom and Casy bit deputy. Deputy lies unconscious and contractor runs away. Casy takes the blame on him in front of police. The deputy decides to burn the camp. The Joad family decides to go somewhere. They are not given entry at some of the places. Tom decides to fight against injustice but the family insists him to stay calm and patient. All this is humiliation and only has to be tolerated. The Joad family frustrates due to the violence and misery faced in Oklahoma and California. The Joad family loses dog, Granpa, Granma, Noah, Casy and Connie, and fall apart in the journey. The members in the family have no work. Sometimes they may get work but suffer from low payment. They get lower quality food on higher prices. In brief, it can be said that Joad family is the representative family of all the families who are humiliated.

Hungry children are humiliated. The smell of Ma's cooking evokes hungry children to surround their tent. Ma serves food to her family members first and remaining gives to these hungry children. Children are not getting enough food in the land. It is their humiliation.

Ignorance causes humiliation to both husband and wife. Uncle John's wife is pregnant and she complains of stomachache but he ignores which results in her death due to appendix. She loses her life due to his ignorance and he becomes widower. He has to live life alone after her death. It is his humiliation.

Tortoise, struck by a car, a parable in chapter – 3 is an indication of humiliation. It shows a struggle to survive.

To conclude, it can be said that the most of the part of the novel is occupied with humiliation.

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