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### **Human Conflicts Against Nature And Mankind: An Ecohumanist Approach To John Steinbeck's The Grapes Of Wrath**

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#### **Abstract**

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is regarded as an American Epic. Steinbeck's view on humanity is well expressed in the novel. Though the novel is a historical record of a crucial period in America, Steinbeck has unified his views on nature and man in it. Man's unendurable sufferings inflicted upon him by the natural calamities, which greedy capitalists further intensified, were well depicted in the novel. The novel encompasses various themes like Capitalism, Marxism, Naturalism, and Ecocriticism. Ecohumanism is a branch of ecocriticism which studies the connection between man and nature. This paper focuses on the human misery portrayed in the novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was imposed on man by nature and fellow human beings.

**Keywords:** Steinbeck, Ecocriticism, Ecohumanism, Ecology, Humanism.

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### **1. Introduction**

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas Valley, California. Steinbeck's association with nature started in his childhood. His birthplace Salinas Valley is abundant with magnificent geographical sceneries. The influence of Salinas Valley on Steinbeck's writing is inseparable. Hence his lenience to nature has ample substantiation in his works.

*The Grapes of Wrath* presents human values, collective survival, free will, and dehumanization of people. Steinbeck has portrayed modernization and the industrial revolution and its impact on nature and man in the novel. The great depression and Dust Bowl were the combined forces behind the great migration presented in the novel.

Ecohumanists have strong faith in the term 'interconnectedness'. They believe in the relationship between nature and humans. Evelyn Steinhauer has shared her perception of the nature and humans in the following words:

We believe that beings thrive when there is a web of interconnectedness between the individual and community, and between the community and nature, everything we do, every decision we make, affects our family and

our community, it affects the air we breathe, the animals, the water in some way. Each of us is totally dependent on everything else. (68)

As implied above, *The Grapes of Wrath* concentrates on the interconnectedness of man and nature and man and community. Nature and man pose a threat to the people shown in the novel.

The novel opens in Oklahoma and ends in California, 'the promised land'. The opening chapters describe the background of the novel. The cyclical climate change leads to drought in Oklahoma and its surrounding places. The tenant farmers or the sharecroppers were worried about seeing the thick mass of sands all over their fields. The cotton crops were all destroyed because of the sand layer on them. The dust storm resulted in irreparable loss to the farmers. The life of the farmers changed forever. The greedy landowners and monstrous banks drove off the farmers from the land. Their houses were crushed by the tractors. A single tractor would replace ten human labor and thus the landowners preferred the modern machine. But the survival of the farmers was at stake because of the modernization in agriculture. Hence, nature on one side and greedy men on the other side made life-threatening conditions to the farmers.

Unemployment led the farmers to move to California. California is viewed as a 'promised land' by the dispossessed farmers. Thus, the American dream of owning a piece of land and leading a peaceful life became inevitable to the farmers. They believed firmly that they could start all over again. They moved along with their family in second-hand jalopies and trucks. They sold their furniture and farm equipment for the least amount. The dealers cheated on them and paid a very meagre amount of money. Dehumanization had its early beginning in Oklahoma itself. The farmers were cheated by the landowners and banks on the one hand and by the dealers and pawnbrokers of California on the other hand. The cruel minded dealers literally tried to rob the possession of the farmers and paid very little in return.

The connection between land and man is depicted through a few characters like Grampa Joad and Muley Graves, who were reluctant to leave their native land. Muley Graves chose to die alone in Oklahoma rather than leaving it. As he was persistent in his decision, his family left him behind. He struggled for food, but he was unwilling to move on even then. He did not want to be a migrant. He did not want to be cut off from his roots. He faced hardships as a lonely man. Joads tried to persuade him to take him along with them, but they could not.

The people of Oklahoma and other states faced many hardships on the significant route to California-Highway 66. They travelled nearly two thousand miles in old cars, trucks and jalopies. Little children and aged people suffered a lot in the long journey. They suffered from thirst and hunger.

Kendyl L. Gibbons in his essay "Empty Bowls" opines that,

Hunger is a challenge older than human existence, for it is the common struggle of all animal species to find enough to eat in order to stay healthy and to rear the next generation. In an unfavourable climates or ecological situations, any species can experience starvation, and for most of human history, homo sapiens has been no exception. Hunger, like war, disease and mortality itself, was long seen as an inevitable product of both natural and social calamities. (115).

The migrant people's sufferings were innumerable, but as Gibbons had asserted in the above quote, hunger became a very big threat to their survival. Nature and capitalistic humans of the Dust Bowl region together endowed the misery of the people.

The cost of water and food, which was raised by the shopkeepers, added to the desolation of the people. Children's whine for water became a constant cry. The farmers carried make ship camp tents with them. They rested awhile wherever they could find water. Some people's cars broke down on the outskirts of the towns. They struggled a lot to get spare parts for their car. The hardships that the people

faced were boundless. The migrant farmers had to face innumerable struggles all along the road to California. The road to California is described well in the following lines: "66-the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map, from the Mississippi to Bakersfield-over the red lands and the gray lands, twisting up into the mountains, crossing the Divide and down into the bright and terrible desert, and across the desert to the mountains again, and into the rich California valleys" (TGOW 110). The people had to cross a number of mountains and deserts to reach California.

Anthropocentrism is one of the minacious attitudes that could be witnessed in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Hence the anthropocentric attitude had exploitation of nature and men as its consequence. William Rueckert, in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", rightly states that ". . .one of ecology's basic maxims: "We are not free to violate the laws of nature," . . .In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing" (113).

The Oklahoma bankers and its landowners and also the Californian landowners are the people who view nature as a thing to be exploited. Their exploitation of nature leads to the exploitation of human beings. The modern tools and technology in agriculture have led them wrong. They wanted to earn as much as they could. The humanity in them was long dead. The greedy and capitalistic exploiters were the reason behind the uprooting of the farmers. They dislocated people and changed their life forever.

The greedy Californian landowners printed handbills advertising for more fruit pickers than they really needed. They did it intentionally so that with more people working the farm, the work could be completed soon and also with a minimum wage. The alluring handbills cheated people who crossed over two thousand miles by road in old trucks. The money they earned through their daily hard work barely met their needs.

Migrants faced victimization and violence by the police force. They were not allowed to stay in the same place for no longer than two weeks. The policemen and strike breakers kept on moving them. The landowners were afraid that if the people were allowed to stay longer in a place, they might unite and strike against them. Hence landowners hired strike breakers and the police force.

## 2. Conclusion

Ecocriticism concentrates on representing the relationship between humans and nature in literature. In analyzing *The Grapes of Wrath*, the representation of the capitalist men's exploitation of nature is equally reflected in their exploitation of poor migrants. Apparently, humanity was at stake, which was the result of the dehumanization of the Dust Bowl migrants. Guistiniani opines, "In the Marxist view, humanism is human fulfillment and perfection, tantamount to happiness, the natural aspiration of all who are thwarted from achieving it by economic need and worker's exploitation; the inherent evils of all societies form their beginnings" (176). As Guistiniani has implied, exploitation is the origin of all the evils to grow. Hence 'humanism' according to the Marxists, is to see the dehumanized people achieve fulfilment and happiness in their lives. Howard Levant, in his article, "*The Fully Matured Art: The Grapes of Wrath*", classifies the miseries of the migrant farmers into two categories: "In Oklahoma and on the road, survival can seem to be mainly a struggle against natural conditions. Drouth is the cause of the migration. "The Bank" dispossesses the Okies, but it is not the effective cause of the drouth" (22). Thus, according to Levant, the first category of miseries imposed on the people was because of nature. "[Whereas] In California the struggle is almost entirely against men, and there is no possibility of an escape by further migration" (22). The second misery was entirely man-made. The lack of humanity was the main cause of the latter category. Steinbeck did not offer a solution for the problems shown in the novel, but he had definitely made the world aware of the sufferings of fellow men.

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