

Socialistic Vision of John Steinbeck and Dos Passos: Foucauldian Analysis of the Grapes of Wrath and Manhattan Transfer

Neha Puri, Aruna Bhat

Abstract: America emerged as a super power after the World War I but people also witnessed the suffering and severe degradation of American life. The Wall Street Crash, the Depression and the growth of Capitalism brought untold miseries to the fruit pickers and the farmers in America. John Steinbeck was inspired by the radical philosophy of Karl Marx who propounded the theory of class less society giving a dialectical relationship between the haves and have not. John Steinbeck is seriously concerned with the struggle of the proletariat. Steinbeck's novels written during the 1930's and 1940's display his strong understanding of the common Communist principles. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is the heartrending tale of how "farming became industry" (298), depicting the sufferings of the farmers trapped in the Dust Bowl of the twenties. Dos Passos depicted his radical vision in his *Manhattan Transfer*. The social injustice caused in the coal fields, in the mines and in the factories shocked Dos Passos who used his art to portray the slums and degradation of the middle class Americans. In this research paper the famous novels *The Grapes of Wrath* of John Steinbeck and *Manhattan Transfer* of John Dos Passos are investigated relying on the theories of power structure propounded by Michael Foucault. John Dos Passos is a celebrated American novelist who brought about cultural and critical renaissance in America since he launched a crusade against the growing materialism and capitalism. The critics hailed Dos Passos as a prophet of social conflict during the Jazz Age and the Depression who championed the cause of the proletariats of the Middle class Americans like John Steinbeck. His novels are indubitably a representation of American life possessing, passion, depth and appreciable artistic power. Dos Passos didn't follow his contemporaries such as Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, Norman Mailer and Joseph Heller who celebrated the romantic adventures of war whereas used his artistic talent to depict the plight and anguish of the middle class Americans working in the factories and living in slums of New York and Chicago. Dos Passos was influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci. The journey of his novels from *One Man's Initiation to U.S.A.* and to *Manhattan Transfer* is full of convincing political analysis and an expression of his Marxian ideology. Dos Passos expresses his serious concern for the oppressed, exploited and the lower middle class workers.

Index Terms: Power Structure, Renaissance, Materialism, Capitalism, Marxism, Crusade, Oppressed, Exploited, Anguish, Plight.

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Neha Puri, Ph. D Researcher, LPU, Punjab, India
Aruna Bhat, Assistant Professor, LPU, Punjab, India

I. INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck and Dos Passos were greatly impacted by the revolutionary atmosphere of 1930s. No wonder, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) of Dos Passos and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)[35],[5],[17] of John Steinbeck explore individual freedom in socialistic collectivism; both the novels describe their nostalgic search for individualism in "free enterprise."

Dos Passos expressed his concern for the loss of liberty of the individuals in his article "America and the Pursuit of Happiness" published in *Nation* thus: "We must stop the economic war, the war for the existence of man against man" (778). [19] *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) of John Steinbeck[17] won the Pulitzer Award in 1940 for his innovative and idealistic thoughts and for a sympathetic description of the poor farmers exhorting the Americans for greater social commitment. The novel is a social protest novel as the novelist highlights the devastating effects of capitalism. Steinbeck expressed his sympathy and moral concern to depict the plight of the outsiders, the alienated, the defeated and the oppressed working class. Steinbeck got Nobel Prize for his serious concern expressed in *The Grapes of Wrath* for the fruit pickers and the farming community and the callous attitude of the bankers and the industrialists. Steinbeck launched a vigorous attack on the merchants and bankers and money lenders denouncing the capitalist doctrine promoting greed, profit, exploitation and materialistic instincts. *The Grapes of Wrath* is about the Joad family. The core of the family consists of Ma and Pa Joad and their six children. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a revolutionary novel challenging the American literary culture which never represented the working classes. Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy published[9] *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology* (2007)[20] in which they highlighted the revolutionary nature of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The plot of *The Grapes of Wrath* records the history and lives of dislocated, poor, white, share cropping farmers from Oklahoma. Steinbeck took up this theme and articulated the plight of the proletariat in a simple, colloquial and touching style. He became the spokesman of the lower class or "the American Underclass" or those "people stuck at the bottom". Steinbeck hits at the machines that enslave the farmers. He vilifies the men that work on the machines:

The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man... He loved the land no more than the bank...He could admire the orgasms set by gears, taping methodically...without passion (John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 48). *The Grapes of Wrath* presents the classic tale of the struggles of the proletariat of America against the forces of nature and cruel business community who took away everything that belonged to them. Steinbeck exposes and ridicules the callous and inhuman nature of the capitalists who use every fair and foul means to exploit the poor and the downtrodden farming community. There are two conspicuous qualities of the novel; it is a protest novel with a tragic theme and has been written to awaken the humanity of the oppressive policies of the capitalistic system of America. Hundreds of thousands small farmers; share croppers have been driven by the banks and the big landlords from their farms to move the Westwards. *The Grapes of Wrath* belongs to the tradition of Dos Passos' trilogy *U.S.A.* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with force and grandeur. The novel is an epic of misery; a prodigious and an excruciating account of agrarian suffering. There were three generations living together but they are forced to go on an unknown destination. The novel is a painful story of death, desertion and hunger. Indeed, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a monograph on rural sociology. He has presented a vivid picture of the social conditions and in the words of Gorky and Lucas the novel is about "social realism." The end of the novel gives the message of social and political awareness and practical wisdom in time of enormous stress. The economic collapse brought a spirit of revolution in America as all political planning failed. The middle class Americans were disillusioned by the collapse of the economic system. But Edmund Wilson (1940) in his book *Classics and Commercials* condemned Steinbeck for his "tendency to present human life in animal terms" (5). Wilson dubbed *The Grapes of Wrath* as a "propaganda novel." The novel became so popular that there was a serious debate about the "Migrant Question" raised by John Steinbeck in this novel. However, Senator Young mobilized public opinion to launch an attack on *The Grapes of Wrath* in league with the Associated Farmers. *The Grapes of Wrath* was banned in Kern County. But the majority of the middle class Americans liked the novel and it turned out to be the best seller in the world. John Steinbeck was deeply hurt by the harsh criticism of his novel and after four months of the publication he retorted thus in *Los Angeles Times*: "I know what I was talking about. I lived off and on, with those Okies for the last three years. Anyone who tries to refute me will just become ridiculous". Lewis Gannett in his book *John Steinbeck: Personal and Biographical Notes* described the eternal socialistic value of the book and called it as "the richest and ripest and the toughest and an example of his tenderness". Margaret Marshall writing in *Nation* attacks the artistic design of Steinbeck which is an example of an "unformed wilderness" sensibility. But V.F. Calverton in his article published in *Nation* took the opposite view eulogizing Steinbeck for his realistic depiction of characters and circumstances in the most positive terms (36). Serious attention was paid to the issues raised by John Steinbeck in 1940 as Lyle H. Boren made a blistering attack on Steinbeck calling the novel as a "dirty, lying and filthy book." However, Percy H. Boynton praised John Steinbeck in his book *America in Contemporary Fiction* observing that he discovered new themes; "the unity of mankind in a

universal soul." In 1941, Frederick I. Carpenter in his article "The Philosophical Joys" observed that Steinbeck took the inspiration from Whitman, Emerson and Dewy to produce a new kind of Christianity in his novel. Warren Beach[2] accorded the classical status to *The Grapes of Wrath*. Alfred Kazin gave a balanced view of *The Grapes of Wrath* remarking that Steinbeck "managed to create a kind of realism that avoided the extremes endemic to the thirties." The list of critical research articles is very long as *The Grapes of Wrath* excited great interest among the critics and the reviewers since the publication of the novel. Lewis Gannett in his *The Portable Steinbeck* reports that Steinbeck visited the Valley to have the real knowledge of the farmers as he reported in 1938: "I must go out over into the interior valley. There are five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry but actually starving..." (Gannett xxii).

Needless to say that John Steinbeck has handled the weapon of fiction, with all its might in an uncompromising manner, for the awareness and for the benefit of humanity. Steinbeck held a faithful mirror up to his land and times in his *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel is classical in themes and tone; it is a social novel evoking the concern for the suffering farmers like Zola and Dos Passos. Jacobson reports that when Steinbeck finished his novel in 1938, he was "exhausted" and the doctors advised him complete rest. It is pertinent to note that when the novel was published it was considered as a "document" and not a novel. George Thomas Miron in his book *The Truth About John Steinbeck and the Migrants* (1939) condemned the novel thus: "*The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel where in naturalism has gone berserk, where truth has run amuck drunken upon prejudice and exaggeration, where matters economic have been hurled beyond the pale of rational and realistic thinking" (5). Steinbeck has written thirty chapters which can be divided into three sections; the long journey of the migrant workers can be traced back to the historical exodus of the Israelites from Egypt given out in the Bible. The first ten chapters of the novel illustrate all the physical and psychological conditions that compel the Joads to leave the farms for good and begin a new search for jobs and survival in the harsh capitalistic system. They become displaced as the land and possessions are either sold are destroyed. In the first Chapter Steinbeck describes the landscape in a poetic manner using the images and metaphors and folk dialect. The opening chapters present the cosmology of all the people who are displaced by industry, drought, the Dust Bowl and economic depression. The tone of the novel [16] Marxian as the main focus is on the epical struggles of the farm workers against the forces of man, nature and oppressive capitalistic system.

Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* opens on a pessimistic note and the protagonist appears as he comes out of the prison. Tom comes to know that his family is staying with his Uncle, ten miles away and that they are also preparing to move away. Of this whole farming community, no one is left but Muley Gravis hiding from the men of Sheriff. He is haunting like a ghost in empty house and "it's wandering around like an old graveyard ghost".

Next morning Tom finds his uncle also preparing with the family to move from the farm as he is supposed to comply with the strict orders of the Sheriff. Steinbeck has depicted the scene of migration and the eviction of the farm in a heart rending language. The women are shown watching their men because “women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole” (7). The family is enveloped in chaos as they look confused and bewildered. Steinbeck presents Ma Joad as a great fighter; a woman of great courage and strength of character.

The last day of the farmers is very hectic and full of activities. They sell a lot many things at a throw away price to the junk dealer as they need money for the journey. Ma Joad is seriously concerned about the loss of house hold things. Ma Joad emerges as a woman of strong character as all children depend upon her for answers in crisis: “What are we going to do, Ma? Where are we going to go?” (47). Two women; Ma Joad and Rose Sharon emerge as bulwarks of the socialist ideology. Steinbeck subverts the traditional role of American woman as both the women become voices of the proletariat class. They represent a ‘socialism of the feelings’ as they launched a fight against the power of the banks and the dispossession of the properties. Steinbeck portrays Ma Joad thus:

Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with child-bearing and work . . . her strong bare feet moved quickly and deftly over the floor. . . Her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy (99).

Dos Passos published his novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) dealing with the fear of the Americans about urbanization and technology and the eventual loss of freedom, alienation and conformity. The critics admitted the vigor and vitality of the novel and Sinclair Lewis (1925) commented thus: “Dos Passos might be the father of humanized and living fiction. Lewis saw *Manhattan Transfer* as more in every way than anything by Gertrude Stein or Marcel Proust or even the great white boar Mr. Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (*Saturday Review* 361). The critics admired the “breathless reality” of the novel and power of Dos Passos to depict the sufferings of the middle class Americans who migrated from various small towns in search of jobs to the metropolis like New York. Dos Passos employed the cinematic techniques, in its flashes, its cutbacks, and its speed. E.D. Lowry, Blanche Gelfant and David Sanders have described the indebtedness of Dos Passos to futuristic art and the films and drama of Eisenstein. *Manhattan Transfer* depicts the theme of emptiness of society and culture in the plot of the novel in two hundred episodes involving half a dozen characters. The plot is set in New York and the city acts as a character in the novel. In the chapter “Nine Days’s Wonder” Dos Passos uses the cinematic techniques of “News Reels”, “Camera Eye” and “Biographies” to relate the actions of the characters with the historical events.

Dos Passos has documented the crazy tunes of the characters running through their heads in *Manhattan Transfer*. They scan newspaper headlines and read slogans given on the headlines of restaurant menus symbolizing their emptiness of life. This device proved very useful in the novels in depicting the temperament, interests and personality of the characters. The “montage sequence” of events of past and the present add special effects to the

narration of the themes and the plot of the novel. Dos Passos is interested in creating the image of five o’clock in New York City and the workers are seen rushing home via subway. The “Newsreel” technique is also very effective as the view presented in the “News Reel” is of the real motion picture giving an insight into the real voice of the contemporary events. These events are not described for their sensational quality but are linked with the main themes of the novel. The characters in *Manhattan Transfer* are aware of “crazy scraps of song” going in their heads which serve to indicate their banality and boredom and the dullness of their environment. Dos Passos has highlighted all the ugliness, greed, lust for money and the human degradation. The sky-scrapers, the back-alleys and the tenements contribute to the development of the plot. Dos Passos has portrayed the vulgarity and garishness of New York; a mad world of sex, high finance and crime. The characters are the products of the modern urban society and their primary concern is their selfish interest and lack of concern for others. They are lustful, avaricious, hypocrite and intellectually shallow given to materialism and self - aggrandizement. Lanny Ace Thomson (1979) observes that in the capitalistic society “the product is not controlled by the workers, but by the capitalists” (Thomson 26). Mrs. Blanche Gelfant observes that the characters of *Manhattan Transfer* are not just fictional characters but are states of mind:

The disorganized characters of *Manhattan Transfer* are created in terms of a starting vision of human disintegration-of man rushing frenetically after false or elusive ideals, confounded by his inabilities and emptiness, lost in search for identity, self- divided and confused. (162)[5,6][1,6]

Michel Foucault explored the working of human nature and culture in his *Technologies of the Self* (1988).[7][8] Foucault discusses the ways in which technologies have always been part of culture and society and lead to self-formation. He aims “ to sketch a history of the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge about themselves... and to analyze these so-called sciences as very specific truth games related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves (17). Manhattan is used as a symbol of industrial civilization; oppressive, greedy, selfish and inhuman. New York is the personification of a historical trend toward monopolistic, capitalism with its denial of freedom to the individuals. He founded *New Masses* magazine in 1926 and wrote articles expressing his radical ideas associated with communistic thinking. His main focus was the welfare of the lower classes and the restoration of the individual freedom; dignity and identity. Dos Passos was so much passionate about the cause of liberty that he was arrested for picketing in behalf of Nicola Sacco and Vanzetti; two men who had been falsely implicated of murder and burglary. He was moved by Sacco-Vanzetti case; he appealed to President Lowell to fight for their liberty and dignity but all his efforts were in vain as both were executed in 1927. This historical episode greatly impacted the mind and sensibility of Dos Passos who saw



America divided into two parts; one part which controlled the wealth and the machinery of law and administration and the other part of vast majority of Americans enslaved and oppressed by the capitalists. Dos Passos observed that the politics was corrupt and so were the businessmen, lawyers and journalists as everybody was crazy to make money by hook or by crook. He wrote in the *News Republic* that “it’s about time that American writers showed up in the industrial field where something is really going on, instead of tackling the tattered straw men of art and culture.” He was against the vested interests and the power structure of the capitalists who used its power to further their selfish gains. Foucault (1988) observes in “Truth, Power, Self” thus:

All my analyses are directed against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we still can enjoy and how changes can still be made. (11)

The novel *Manhattan Transfer* opens on a note of death and decay. The novel opens with a hospital scene where a nurse holds a new born baby “squirmed in the cotton wool feebly like a knot of earthen worm” (Dos Passos *Manhattan Transfer* 3). Ellen is the baby born in the first page of the novel. Her tongue clicks “like the ticking the clock” (44). Jimmy Herf is the central consciousness of the novel belonging to a wealthy family. He appears on 4 July, 1904 living in a hotel with a child with a mother. His mother died in his childhood. He was brought up by his Aunt Emily and Jeff Merivale who finds Jimmy Herf quite disinterested in money matters. The common tendency in the youth was to earn and collect money but Herf is quite a different young boy as Jeff remarks:

I have not noticed that you felt sufficient responsibility about money matters...sufficient enthusiasm about earning your living, making good in man’s world. Look around you.... thrift and enthusiasm has made these men what they are. (100)

To conclude, both the novels *The Grapes of Wrath* of John Steinbeck and *Manhattan Transfer* of Dos Passos depicts the wounded psyche of the American middle class people who joined hands together to revolt against the capitalistic forces. The novels are historical documents as they expose and ridicule the inhuman and oppressive policies of the capitalist of America.

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