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JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*: A STUDY OF THE NATURALISM

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Abstract:

*American literature is the literary work produced in the area of the United States and its preceding colonies. During its early history, America was a series of British colonies on the eastern coast of the present day United States. Therefore, its literary tradition begins as linked to the broader tradition of English literature. Herman Melville, Vladimir Nabokov and Thomas Pynchon have made a remarkable mark in American literature. Naturalism was first proposed and formulated by Emile Zola, the French writer and theorist who is universally labeled as the founder of literary naturalism. It was a literary movement used realism to suggest that social condition, heredity and environment had inescapable force in shaping human character. Naturalistic writers were influenced by evolution theory of Charles Darwin. They believed that one's heredity and social environment determine ones character and influence the action of its subjects. This paper is an attempt to highlight the aspects of naturalism in *The Grapes of Wrath*.*

Keywords: *Naturalism, Heredity, Environment, Character, etc.*

Webster's Dictionary gives a concise definition of naturalism: "A made of thought philosophical, religious or moral glorifying nature and excluding supernatural and spiritual elements close adherence to nature in art or literature" (Webster). According to M. H. Abhrams, "naturalism, a product of post Darwinian biology in 19th century held that the human being exist entirely in order of nature and does not have a soul nor in mode of participating in a religious or spiritual world beyond the natural world therefore that such a being is merely a higher order animal whose character and behaviour are entirely determined by two kinds of forces, heredity and environment" (Abrams, 261).

In the 20th century naturalism, a synonym of the American dream, the rich were getting richer and poor more poorer. Steinbeck often tagged as leftist and portrayed the grim picture of society and futility of the American dream. Steinbeck go beyond the boundaries of Americanism by questioning the capitalistic set up of America. John Steinbeck was an American writer born in Salinas, California in Feb 27, 1902. He was the third of four children and only boy. His family was a close, middle class unit living in a small community. Both of his parents believed exposing their children to culture. They also had wide variety of novels in the home. At the age of nine John Steinbeck received a copy of Malory's 'Morte d Arthur' which proved to be one the biggest influences in his literary career. So his interest in writing developed at the young age. He also wrote many articles and short stories for the newspaper. He once remarked to his classmate "you know I write the purest English of any one in the world." He continued his career in college by writing the articles which appeared in, 'The Stanford Spectator.' After high school, Steinbeck worked in many different jobs including a laborer in a sugar factory in Salinas and traveled throughout the Salinas valley.



He spoke for the Americanism of the poor and the destitute by associating it with his criticism of class oppression. Steinbeck's major novels, *In Dubious Battle*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pearl* deal with alienation, cultural disintegration, fragmentation of the society, degeneracy and corruption that prevails in urban American life. Steinbeck, through his activism and fiction seeks to surpass the idea of Americanism as was practiced by the rich and the powerful. He ingrains Americanism with the thoughts, concerns and narratives of the working class, reposing his faith in Socialism of Karl Marx.

Steinbeck in the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* gives a detailed analysis of the causes of American agrarian society conversion into an industrial society. Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* is an epic of misery, a powerful and extremely painful suffering of agrarian. The Joads from three generations were living together but they were forced to go to an unknown destination. Joads who were once growers become share croppers; from share croppers to now they are transformed in wage labourers. The capitalistic set up had reduced them to a machine. As migrant labour in California they suffered hunger, starvation, oppression and exploitation there. The main focus is on the epic struggles of the farm workers against the forces of man, nature and oppressive capitalistic system.

The Joad family is called upon to fight against the forces of nature symbolized by drought, industry, fear and greed. Kenneth Burk in his book *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941) observes that *The Grapes of Wrath* is not simply about the Okie migration but about the treatment of one group of humans by another. There are multiple layers in the plot of the novel depicting the radical vision of John Steinbeck. The most effective theme is the development of class consciousness in the Joads and their heroic struggle against the forces of capitalism and nature. Steinbeck is dealing with the bottom dogs and the major portion of the novel is about the lowest layers of society. Cletus Daniel in his book 'Bitter Harvest' argues that "the American farmers belonged to the tradition of the early settlers and pioneers as they were committed to the old values of self-reliance, liberty and simplicity. Farming for them was not just an occupation to earn bread but was a way of life to promote all the noble ideals enshrined in the American Dream" (Danile, 15).

In the 20th century farming became an industry, greed, selfishness and money culture became the main motives of the rich landlords. Steinbeck described the emergence of new culture of selfishness and greed which destroyed peace and harmony of the poor farmers. The main thrust of the novelist is on the theme of disintegration of the middle class. No wonder the Joad family declines economically and morally as the family unit breaks up. Grampa died at the outset of the journey Noah deserts the family Connie deserts Rose-of-Sharon; Rose Sharon's child is born dead. Tom becomes a fugitive. Al is planning to leave the tribe as soon as possible and Casy was killed. The entire plot is packed with the tragic and harrowing episodes describing the decay of the family, society and culture.

The end of the novel gives the message of social, political awareness and practical wisdom in time of enormous stress. This research paper gives a positive message of how the mankind can save itself from a meaningless life of alienation and despair. It also highlights various shades of naturalism in 'The Grapes of Wrath'.

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